

the [p] club

leader's guide for discussion

about

The [P] Club is a short documentary about eleven Duke Divinity women who talk candidly about sex and faith. With grace, humor, and self-reflection, they thoughtfully and courageously tackle a variety of topics related to sex including purity culture, hookup culture, dating, sexual violence, masturbation, feminism, body image, desire, and relationships all through a theological lens. Though they may not always agree or reach all the answers, their stories are a powerful testament to the importance of honest and open conversation about sex among Christians.

CREDITS

Directed by: Christine Delp
Produced by: Wesley Hogan

The [P] Club participants: Nicole Armstrong, Emma DeVries, Heidi Johnson, Lara Musser-Gritter, Jennifer Simonton, Emily Smiley, Casey Stanton, Hana Suckstorff, Alex Treyz, Antonia Terrazas, and Indhira Udofia

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keep-in-minds

A few important “keep-in-minds” as you facilitate discussion

- Use The [P] Club documentary as a resource. As Antonia says, “One person’s honesty begets another person’s honesty and vulnerability.” The film is a resource for people to open up about their own thoughts on sexuality, so it is helpful for everyone in the discussion group to have seen it.
- Establish trust in the group. As much as possible, keep the group the same each week.
- Some of the group will love what the church has taught them about sex, while some will have bitterness. Be sure to include space for all the voices in the room and let the women teach each other as well.
- Not all the women in the room will be cis-gendered or heterosexual. Please be careful of generalizing everyone’s sexual preferences and gender identities.
- Balance discussion with personal reflection. Some of discussion questions are very personal, and participants may not always feel comfortable sharing. Keep a stack of index cards on hand for people to write down responses or questions anonymously. Be open to periods of journaling/reflection if you think that would be helpful.
- Maintain a safe space by setting some ground rules for discussion. The following are adopted from Dr. Anthea Portier-Young’s “Domestic Abuse and the Bible” course syllabus. Dr. Portier-Young is the Associate Professor of Old Testament at Duke Divinity School.
 - Do not interrupt or speak over the person speaking.
 - Listen with respect and attention, from your heart, to the best of your ability.
 - Speak in “I” statements rather than in normative “you” statements.
 - “Step up and step back”: If we usually don’t talk much, we will challenge ourselves to speak more. If we find ourselves talking more than others, we will speak less.
 - Be aware of dynamics of privilege and disenfranchisement related to race, ethnicity, carceral status, class, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, age, particularities of one’s life experience, abilities, etc.
 - Don’t make assumptions about anyone’s history of sexual assault or intimate partner violence.
 - If the content of any discussion is triggering, allow everyone to take care of themselves first. Group participants should know that they are free to step back momentarily or leave entirely from group discussion.
 - Personal stories, reactions, or feelings that are shared in discussion should be kept confidential. If anyone wishes to incorporate insights shared by a group member in a paper, sermon, or speaking engagement, she must first receive permission from that person and allow that person to view and approve what is written.

week one

liberation stories

▮▮ I decided it was time to not wear the ring anymore. ▮▮
- Lara

Introduction

We are so excited you've decided to join us on the road toward sexual wholeness, healing, and celebration. Our time in Pussy Club has been an incredible gift in each of our lives. It has helped us process our own stories, learn to hold each other's stories, and mark out our own sense of what it means to be fully faithful and sexual. As you're starting out in this journey together, we want to offer you a bit of the wisdom that we have gleaned since starting Pussy Club. Sexuality is a "touchy topic" and we invite you to embrace the challenges that come with discussing the God-given gift of sexuality. None of us are entitled to hear another person's story. When someone does choose to share some of her story, it is a gift to be held with honor and care—not to be assessed or judged like abstract data. At different times each of us wanted to resist the conversation by shutting others down with hard lines and judgments—we challenge you to embrace the complexity and tension that will arise between you and your peers. This time together will not solve any problems or questions—but it may offer you the gift of companionship in the midst of this beautiful and meandering journey.

Opening Activity

This is an opportunity to reflect as an individual, and then with the group, on your own story in relation to sexuality, the church, what you were taught growing up about sex, what you believe about sexuality now, how that relates to your faith, and what questions you have on this theme.

1. Invite participants to take some time to writing or drawing their stories.
2. Then invite participants to get into pairs and share one moment from their story. This can be an opportunity for participants to bond with each other on a one-to-one basis. It could bring up rumbles of laughter as some share funny stories or it could bring up deep moments of contemplation.
3. Come back together as a full group and invite each participant to share one word that represents or was present in her story.

Guiding Discussion Questions

1. In the documentary, what ways did various members of the P Club experience liberation?
2. Whose story did you resonate with?

Think back on your story:

3. What is the narrative you've been told growing up about sex?
4. What hurt about the way you were taught about sex?
5. What do you wish was done differently?
6. What do you long for in your own story in the future?

A note on this week's discussion: when we say "liberation," we do not mean to communicate just the idea of "sexual liberation" as popularized in the 1960s (free love, etc.), (though that might be the way you find liberation!), but rather, we are talking about a diversity of ways that all of us—coming from a whole range of opinions, backgrounds, and goals—began to journey toward wholeness, and even freedom, in our identities as women who are wholly faithful and wholly sexual beings.

Written by Antonia, Emma, & Lara

week two

bodies: pleasure & shame

“His words, that we weren’t pure enough, really stuck with me. All that intimacy that we shared—was bad?”
- Jen

Introduction

In some Christian circles, we are told that God deeply cares about our bodies and what we do with them—specifically when it comes to sexual intimacy. We somehow manage to learn that sexuality is dangerous, that men and women should not be alone together, and that our sexuality is like edible objects (thanks, Lara!), etc. Your group will have their own ideas about what the church thinks about sexuality—and about what God thinks about sexuality. Take note of what the students say; note how many understandings of “Christian sexuality” revolve around what NOT to do and the shaming of what IS done. Many of us grow up with the belief that God dislikes sexuality until we are married—then everything is good to go. Unfortunately, this is not how fear and shame work (check out Brené Brown for this!). They bleed not only into how we see sexuality with each other but how we see sexuality within ourselves. If we are afraid of our own sexual pleasure, marriage alone is not going to redeem pleasure for us, and what about those who feel called to single life? In doing this, we are robbing each other of healthy sexual fulfillment even within marriage.

You may know that most churches do not talk about sexuality. But we would rather talk to our youth group students, our sisters, and our young cousins about sexuality within the church, rather than letting them figure it out on their own or from untrustworthy sources. We never want our girls to believe that they are as transient as an edible object and we never want our boys to believe that they are unable to control themselves around something as delicious as “cake.” The truth is that women’s bodies do not have to be scary, and men are able to control themselves. This means that we can experience pleasure. God made pleasure for us to enjoy (safely). Sometimes we think that pleasure is just for fun without repercussions, and sometimes we think it is too dangerous to even try. It is somewhere in the middle. Intimacy is very important, but it is neither so fun that it should be taken lightly, nor so scary that it should be avoided. Practice forgiveness with yourself and your friends and your family. Our bodies are not perfect but can experience incredible joy. Let yourself feel joy in safe spaces.

We would like to suggest that God cares about our bodies—deeply. God created us as bodies, became a human with a body, and then gave us guidelines for how to treat our bodies. However, before that, God commanded us to care for creation. All creation. If we are created by God, then that includes us. We believe that God cares about our whole selves—eating, sleeping, thinking, learning, faith, relationships, family, showering, exercising, and intimacy. If I am going to be with someone—they need to care about all of those aspects of my body if they are going to get near any of it. Intimacy does not exist in a vacuum—it is a part of the whole that is our lives.

I am not any more afraid of intimacy than if I get enough sleep in a night—but this took years of thinking and learning and experiencing. Please talk to your group about how to begin seeing intimacy as more than sex and that the entire body matters. It is impossible to be perfect, yet our churches have made the guidelines God has given us for our bodies purely legalistic. With this standard, only our failures matter. The truth is, we will eat badly, forget to exercise, forget to pray, and let hook-ups go too far. These are not failures, and God’s love does not depend on being a perfect sexual or nonsexual body, grace abounds.

Opening Activity

1. Watch Brené Brown’s TedTalk on shame. Ask the group if they think shame is part of the church experience.
2. Ask the group to journal on what they believe or have heard that God and the church thinks about bodies and intimacy. What should we feel good about? What should we feel shame about? What does pleasure mean to them?

Guiding Questions for Discussion

3. Define shame and pleasure as a group. (preferably in a visible way)
4. Make a list of things that bodies can do. Mark which actions the group thinks God cares about. Is that different from what the “church” cares about? Have you experienced this tension before?
5. Invite the group to share stories about what they think about shame in the film—what did they see different people experiencing? What seemed to be the thing that helped the women heal?
6. Brené Brown talks about shame and the importance of sharing the shame we feel before it gets out of hand and becomes an unhealthy part of our lives. Have any of you seen this happening in your lives? Specifically in regard to body-shaming?
7. IF YOUR GROUP IS FEELING COURAGEOUS: Please use our #GraceAbounds #PclubDocumentary hashtag to encourage your group to post on social media about where grace abounds in their experience of their bodies.

Written by Emily & Nicole

week three

sex & violence

▯▯ **That was evil. That was really evil.** ▯▯
- Casey

Introduction

The subject matter of this week can be painful and deeply personal. Statistics suggest that there will be people in your group who are survivors of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) and/or Sexual Assault (SA). The inverse of that statistic means that among your group might be perpetrators of violence and those who are dual perpetrators and survivors of IPV and SA. IPV and SA negatively affect not only victims and perpetrators, but also witnesses (including children) and those who love and support survivors and perpetrators, including family members and friends. Such individuals are sometimes called “secondary victims/survivors” of IPV or SA. Recognize that there will be secondary survivors among your group as well. There will also be those among your group those who do not have direct or secondary experience of IPV or SA. The experiences of every person in the group are valued.

Opening Activity: The Mask You Live In: The Two-Sided Mask

Before starting the activity, make sure you have enough “masks” for your group. The masks are paper plates with holes cut out for eyes and string attached to the sides so that the mask may be worn. You will also want to have a number of magazines and other resources, such as yarn, beads, feathers, and other odds and ends as seem appropriate to the group with which you are working. You will need to have markers or crayons, scissors and glue ready as well.

Give each group member one of the masks. Have them identify the outside and inside of the mask. Have them begin to decorate the outside of the mask with items, which reflect what they think people see when they look at them. You can ask them to think about how their friends see them, or co-workers, or family. Glue images or draw on the mask how they think others see them. When they are done with the outside, have them turn the mask around. Now, have them think about how they see themselves, and decorate the inside of the mask with objects or drawings, which reflect how they see themselves. When done, have the participants talk about how they see themselves, and how others see them, using the masks as visual aids. As facilitator, pay attention to differences between the two sides.¹

“You can’t keep your true self hidden forever; before long you’ll be exposed. You can’t hide behind a religious mask forever; sooner or later the mask will slip and your true face will be known. You can’t whisper one thing in private and preach the opposite in public.” (Luke 12:3 MSG)

Guiding Question for Discussion

1. In your experience, how does the church help, hold, or harm survivors’ stories of Intimate Partner Violence and Sexual Assault?
 2. In The [P] Club Documentary Casey shares her story of sexual assault and Heidi shared her story of intimate partner violence. How did each of their particular experiences as survivors of IPV and SA intersect with attending church? How were their experiences similar and different?
 3. How do you want the church to respond to the very prevalent reality of sexual violence?
 4. Have copies of the Power and Control wheel for the group be able to look at and take home.² Explain how rape and sexual assault is not about sex but about power and control. Discuss how not all power and control abuse in relationships is physical or sexual. What are other stories of relationships in The [P] Club Documentary echoes with areas on the Power and Control wheel that is not physical or sexual?
 5. Connect that discussion to the masks activity. How does hiding or feeling trapped behind a mask lead to inflicting power and control over others? How does hiding or feeling trapped behind a mask lead us to think we deserve abuse inflicted upon us?
 6. What are stories in Scripture or Theology (God-talk) that are helpful or harmful for survivors and perpetrators of IPV and SA?
- For example, harmful texts of terror like Judges 11 and Judges 19 and inappropriate and harmful understanding of Christian forgiveness and reconciliation. Have a discussion around perpetrators of violence in the Bible by looking at David and his raping of Bathsheba. What themes stick out in that story? Who calls David out on his violence? Who does David seek forgiveness from? Hint: Bathsheba does not call out David nor does David seek her to forgive him of his sin. How might this be a healthy or harmful paradigm for forgiveness? The prophet Nathan rebukes David on his sexual violence against Bathsheba. David then seeks forgiveness from God. What are the group’s thoughts on Nathan role as a witness to sexual violence? How are his actions helpful or harmful?
 - Secondly, how might Jesus hanging from the cross as a victim of traumatic violence represent a paradigm of forgiveness for survivors of IPV and SA. “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:24). In this statement, Jesus asks God to forgive his abusers. Jesus is not directly forgiving his abusers nor is anyone asking Jesus to forgive the people who crucified him. In these paradigms of forgiveness survivors give the work of forgiveness to God and perpetrators seek forgiveness from God. God is always the direct source of all forgiveness.

Written by Casey, Heidi, & Indhira

week four

one body, one church: sex & church community

“Even in the act of sex, even if you think it’s your own private choosing, there is a community that will surround you and love you through that process.”
- Indhira

Introduction

In imagining the possibilities of how the Church community could approach sex, we affirm the following principles:

1. Inclusivity: Allowing for and encouraging members to express their respective takes on sex/sexuality.
 - a. There is no one way to talk about sex and sexuality; don’t fret about building consensus.
 - b. Additionally, there is no “right” way to experience sex or sexuality. Appreciate and honor that everyone has had a unique experience. Reflect on the myriad of biblical examples, such as the beloved in Song of Songs – mutuality, joy in sex; or Bathsheba and Hagar – coerced into sex and raped.
2. Sex positivity: We affirm that sex and sexuality are inherently good, though both can be used/experienced in harmful ways (i.e. sexual assault and intimate partner violence)
3. The importance of storytelling: Sharing our stories and questions together in community brings us closer to God and one another.
 - a. Sex does not have to pull you away from God, but can draw you closer to God.
 - b. Whether you desire sex or not, there is nothing wrong with you either way.
 - c. We affirm that everyone’s unique story is a gift to be shared with and received by the church. In sharing and holding our stories, even as varied as they may be, we live as the church.

Opening activity

1. Open with a couple of introductory questions. Ask participants if their churches have ever talked about sex. If so, how? Have participants heard sex talked about as a curse? As a gift?
2. Read Song of Solomon chapters 4 and 5 out loud as a group. Assign individuals to read the part of lover, beloved, and daughters of Jerusalem (multiple individuals may be assigned to lover and beloved and take turns). Then discuss the following questions:
 - a. How are sex and sexual desire described in this passage?
 - b. How would you describe the relationship between lover and beloved in these two chapters?
 - c. How does this passage relate to the verses from Psalm 139 (v. 13-14) that open the film?

Guiding Questions for Discussion (with time codes)

1. Did you relate to any of the stories told by Jen, Alex, or Hana? If so, why?
2. How do you define sex? I.e., is sex just penetration? Oral sex? Any kind of sexual contact, etc.?
3. When you think of good sex, what do you think of?
4. Where in the bible do you see good sex, aka mutual, consensual? Bad sex, aka coerced sex/sexual assault?
5. Alex shares her thoughts on casual sex at 25:10. What are your thoughts on this? In what context do you think sex should happen? Marriage only? A relationship? Whenever two people consent? Whenever two people are in love? And why?
6. Have you been encouraged by your church – in youth group/small group – to talk about sex?
7. At 18:22, Jen discusses how she felt when her ex-boyfriend claimed they were not “pure enough.” Have you ever felt shame for your sexual desires or sexual experiences? Has anyone ever shamed you? A former partner? A current partner? Have you ever shamed others for their sexual desires or experiences? If so, why? Does shame have any place in conversations about sex?
8. Emma speaks at the end of the film about living into the questions around sex/sexuality with community. Do you agree? Disagree? How do you see this happening, or not happening?
9. In our churches and in our communities, how can we talk about sex in a way that is life giving for all involved in the discussion?
10. How might you go forth and encourage life-giving discussion within the Church about sex?

Written by Alex, Hana, & Jen