

"I need to talk with the two of you about what I saw today." And so began a very awkward, painful, conversation! The participants were a man and a woman, both of whom were in the eighties and myself. As the Director of Spiritual Life for The United Methodist Homes I know all of our residents as well as anyone else on staff. So it seemed obvious that of all the people on our staff I was the likely one to initiate this conversation. What I had seen had been seen repeatedly by other staff and residents. All, including myself, were uncomfortable initiating the conversation. What had occurred on more than one occasion is that this "couple" was engaged in our public areas in some very inappropriate sexual behavior. (Inappropriate, as least, in public.)

When the conversation began, it was embarrassing to the couple and embarrassing to me. Yet the situation had to be addressed. How it was addressed is less important than the reminder the situation presented. It is one we are often uncomfortable with and which we often deny. It is the reminder that older adults have the same urges and needs to express their sexuality as younger people do. How that need is met is as different as the situation and as different as the individual involved. Coupled with this reminder came the awareness that we are often in denial about this fact. We don't want to acknowledge that Mom or Dad or Grandma or Grandpa even think about such things.

I'm not sure how to deal with this in the context of my ministry with older adults, but I am sure that if I'm not aware of it, I am not likely to address the needs of the whole person.

So, some preliminary thoughts!

1. Be willing to let the subject of sexuality in older adults be permissible.
2. Be aware that expressing one's sexuality at any age is about much more than "sex."
3. Take every opportunity to express the human need to be touched that seems comfortable to you and her/him. (Hold a hand, hug, pat the shoulder, walk with arms around the person)
4. In an institutional setting (church, nursing home, assisted living facility), provide opportunities for people to express their need for physical contact in a socially acceptable, appropriate way. Rituals such as the passing of the peace and holding hands in a circle of prayer are both theologically correct. A side benefit is they allow physical contact. Dancing, for those able, is another possibility.

I'm anxious to hear your thoughts as I reflect on how to move forward in this area!

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