

Open discussion enables groups to help others with sex problems

EDITOR'S NOTE: The following article was written by The Star's religion editor after he attended most of the sessions of a week-long seminar on human sexuality as an invited observer. An article on the background of the program appears today on Page 2D.

COLOR

By WILLMAR THORKELOSON
The Star's Religion Editor

In a dimly lit auditorium in southeast Minneapolis, 75 men and women were sprawled out on large pillows watching sexually explicit films.

On the first night of the seven days they were together, as many as six films were projected simultaneously on one wall while pulsating rock music blared out.

The film barrage included heterosexual intercourse, oral-genital sex by couples, homosexual sex, masturbation, bestiality and masochism.

During the rest of the week, there were more films, slides, audio tapes, film panels and large and small group discussions about the emotional and physical aspects of sexual behavior.

On display part of the week was a collection of erotic merchandise including artificial sex organs, contraceptive stimulators, vibrators and other articles.

5,000 take course

Last week's 75 participants — mostly Lutheran child-center workers — were among about 5,000 persons who have taken part in the Program in Human Sexuality sponsored by the University of Minnesota medical school in the past three years.

The objective is to help people understand their sexuality and to talk openly about it and thus become better able to help others with sexual problems.

Dr. Richard A. Chilgren directs the program at the medical school. Last week's seminar was co-sponsored by the American Lutheran Church's Division for Service and Mission in America, with the Rev. James Siefkes of that division as coordinator.

Because communication is regarded as one of the most difficult areas involving sexuality, seminar participants early in the week were asked to take part in an "exercise in communications."

They were urged to respond with synonyms for such words as menstruation, homosexuality, urination, masturbation and intercourse.

Participants respond

When the participants showed out a variety of funny, coarse and vulgar explanations, Mary Briggs, coordinator of sexual health services for the medical school program, observed:

"You people are amazing."

Another session dealt with the importance of touching as a means of communication. Films showed how children and adults who had not been mothered or touched had developed emotional problems.

Masturbation was discussed at another session. Dr. James Maddock, education and training coordinator for the medical school program, said that probably 100 percent of all males and two-thirds to three-fourths of all women masturbate at some time.

"Guilt is the single most difficult thing resulting from masturbation," he said.

Ms. Briggs said some research indicates that people who have masturbated end up with a better sexual relationship when married.

Homosexuality session

A session on homosexuality was led the Rev. Tom Maurer, United Church of Christ minister who is a counselor-lecturer in the sexuality program. Maurer, a homosexual, argued that "people ought to be free to do anything they want sexually so long as it does not exploit other people's rights."

He said homosexuals constitute "the second largest minority group in society and the only one it is legal to discriminate against."

"The church tells them that they are sinners, doctors tell them that they are sick and the police tell them that they are criminals," he noted.

"It constantly amazes me that we can't accept people unless we can approve of them," he added.

Maurer said there are several "myths" about "gay" people:

- "You can tell a 'gay' person."
- "Homosexuality is contagious and if your son or daughter has one experience, he or she will be a confirmed queer."
- "Homosexuals love children."
- "Homosexuals want to jump into bed with everyone of the same sex."
- "Homosexuals are creative and artistic. Actually an awfully lot of us are plain clods."
- "Homosexuals hate the opposite sex. 'Some of my best friends are women.'"

A 38-year-old woman and a 23-year-old man told how they had accepted their homosexuality. The woman, a former high school teacher, said she couldn't admit having feelings that weren't heterosexual until two years ago.

Society makes fun

"Everything I heard in society made me make fun of 'queers,'" she said.



DR. JAMES MADDOCK
Large-group leader



MARY BRIGGS
Large-group leader



JAMES HELD
Program assistant



REV. JAMES SIEFKES
Seminar coordinator

The man, who is training to be a pilot, said he decided to "come out" as a homosexual in 1969 and told his parents. He said he now feels free to hold hands with male friends while walking on the beach or while sailing or flying.

Maurer and the other two panelists said Minneapolis has become a leader in recognizing the rights of gays.

At a session devoted to "The Church and the Gay Community," participants saw a film on the struggle a 26-year-old Californian, William Johnson, had before he could be accepted for ordination as a minister of the United Church of Christ in 1972.

Maurer said churches are "loaded" with homosexuals but "incredible damage" is done to them. He added that he knows "all kinds of ministers who are gay."

He said there are now more than 100 "gay" churches in the nation—a development he deplored.

"The last thing in the world I am interested in is a new segregation," he explained.

That night, the participants went to homes of "gay" hosts for cocktails, then took their hosts out to dinner. Later, their hosts led them on a tour of local "gay" bars.

Wheelchair participants

For many participants, the highlight of the week was the afternoon that a group of wheelchair occupants — paraplegics and cerebral palsy victims — and their spouses told about their sexual activity. They reported they had found sexual fulfillment — some by using techniques which are generally considered unorthodox.

The wife of a victim of a spinal cord injury said her sex life was better now than when she was married to an able-bodied man.

A 38-year-old male cerebral palsy victim said a "woman of the evening" had responded to his telephoned plea to give him his first experience with heterosexual sex.

Throughout the week, the lectures and films were interspersed with exercises — some involving relaxing, touching, fantasies and role-reversals.

One exercise dealt with "value clarification" in which participants using cards were able to evaluate how their values regarding sexual behavior rated on an emerging traditional scale.

It was found that many tended toward a liberal outlook.

Another exercise involved the taking of a personal sexual history.

Much of the time during the week was spent in small groups, with 10 or 11 persons assigned to each, including two "group facilitators" — a male and a female for each group.

Understanding attitude

In the small group sessions, the participants, again sitting or lying on pillows, gave their reactions to what they had seen and heard in the large auditorium and shared their feelings on a more personal level.

The small group, according to Chilgren, program director, is intended to "foster an interchange that puts these feelings into perspective and permits development of an understanding attitude toward the sexuality of self and others."

At the end of each seminar, participants are asked to fill out questionnaires evaluating their experience. Reactions are checked again six weeks and a year later.

According to James Held, assistant to Chilgren, about a half of the participants report that the seminar experience has changed their sexual behavior to give them more satisfaction.

In addition, 60 to 66 percent say the seminar changed their non-sexual behavior in some way.

More than 90 percent of the participants say they found the seminars personally beneficial.



DR. R. A. CHILGREN
Sexuality program director



Minneapolis Star Photos by Larry Schreiber

One of nine small groups in University human sexuality program

203

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