

## Conference to equip clergy, laity to have open, honest conversations about sex

by **Lolita Cusic**

David took Bathsheba away from her husband Uriah. Delilah seduced Sampson. Abraham slept with another woman – with his wife Sarah’s permission. And King Solomon wrote love poems.

Sex, love and lust are everywhere in the Bible. So why aren’t more Christians comfortable talking about sex in the church?

The Alliance of Baptists will be addressing that subject at its **JUSTSEX** conference to be held Oct. 18-20 at the Scarritt Bennett Center in Nashville, Tenn.

“I believe and the Alliance believes that discussing human sexuality in church can help change the way the world perceives sexuality,” said Carole Collins, director of operations and finance for the Alliance. “If we talk about sex early and often, if it’s not a taboo subject in our churches, it’s going to change the way the world views sexuality.”

The idea for the conference grew out of discussions held at a board meeting three years ago, said Collins, a conference organizer. The group talked about everything from marriage between a man and a woman to same sex marriages, from polyamorous relationships to monogamous ones, from premarital sex to talking to teens about sex. Collins said much of the conversation was sparked by meeting speaker William Stayton, a Baptist minister, licensed psychologist and certified sexuality educator and therapist.

As a result, the board decided to host the **JUSTSEX** conference, made possible by grants from The E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation and The Richard. D. Huff Foundation Trust, said Alliance president Michael Castle.

“This is not a conference about gay and lesbian inclusion, but a conference about the issue of sexuality in general,” said Castle, senior pastor of Harmony Creek Church in Dayton, Ohio and also a conference organizer.

“Sex is not something that’s dirty, sinful or shameful, but a God-given blessing,” he said. “People’s sexual practices are not just confined to marriage. We have single people who aren’t waiting to get married to have sex. We have friends with benefits. Marriages are not always defined by monogamy. We have polyamorous relationships knocking at the door.”

Yet, “the church is still archaic in how it expresses its sexual ethics. It’s the elephant in the room,” Castle said. “People are afraid to talk about sex. I hope we can get over our fear.”

Both Collins and Castle feel the conference can help congregations shape a new and more contemporary ethic when it comes to sexuality. The rise of the #MeToo Movement and gender issues in the news also make the conference even more timely, Collins said.

It's the right time "to have a serious, faithful and honest conversation about this particular topic," Castle said. "In the Baptist world, sex has been and continues to be a hot topic that most Baptist churches don't want to handle."

What can conference attendees expect? There will be Bible studies, worship, workshops, breakout sessions and, of course, plenary sessions with three dynamic speakers – Stayton (<https://allianceofbaptists.org/assets/uploads/BIO-Stayton-Short.pdf>), Kelly Brown Douglas (<https://allianceofbaptists.org/assets/uploads/BIO-Douglas-Short.pdf>) and Marvin Ellison (<https://allianceofbaptists.org/assets/uploads/BIO-Ellison-Short.pdf>).

Attendees also will explore:

- How understandings of sexuality have changed over time;
- How cultures, institutions and faith traditions approach sexuality – both in the past and in our current moment;
- Guiding principles for developing a contemporary sexual ethic; and
- How people of faith reclaim sex as a gift from God and support healthy sexuality in our communities.

"I hope these clergy and lay leaders go back to their ministry settings with a little more confidence and with the resources to help them have conversations on sexuality in their own contexts," Collins said.

Details on the Bible study, worship and small group leaders can be found on the conference web page (<https://allianceofbaptists.org/calendar/event/justsex-honest-faithful-conversation>), along with registration information. Key portions of the conference also will be videotaped for viewing and as a resource after the event.

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