PORNOGRAPHY

The 1986 General Synod instructed this commission to study the issue of pornography, giving special attention to child pornography, the new behavioral evidence on the effects of pornography, and conditions within which pornography flourishes (*MGS 1986*, pp. 104-105).

Pornography is of ongoing concern. The General Synod received reports from this commission in 1972 (*MGS 1972*, pp. 203-206) and again in 1978 (*MGS 1978*, pp. 185-199). These reports concluded that pornography represents the dehumanization of the person and perverts the nature of sexuality as a way of expressing humanness.

The 1978 study expanded the definition of pornography to include violence against the person, most specifically against those used as objects for sexual gratification, especially women and children. The 1978 study concluded with a series of recommendations that called on the church to affirm the positive nature of sexuality through education, and to support images in our culture that reinforce the biblical view of person. That Synod also urged the churches to oppose the production of pornographic materials and especially the violence done to children in the production of such material.

When talking about pornography, one must be careful to delineate just what is meant. Although pornography is generally understood to be that which simply offends, and thus what counts as pornography tends to be highly subjective, the commission offers some definitional clarity. Pornography is that material which promises to fulfill the quest for human sexuality by dehumanizing either other persons, the person offered the promise, or both. While pornography is usually associated with the perversion of sexuality, and while that use of the term is now under consideration by the Synod, the commission reminds the church that pornography has a much wider scope. In our society, sexual pornography most often results in the dehumanization of women and children by portraying these persons as objects for sexual fulfillment. This in turn leads us to the suggestion that pornography sets the stage for a violent sort of dehumanization.

Since 1978 there has been much study aimed at discovering a link between pornography and violence. Recent conclusions from the social scientific community tend to lend credence to the intuitive sense that pornography leads to aberrant sexual behavior or to violence. A gathering of researchers called together by the US Surgeon General offered the following statements of consensus from their study:

1. Children and adolescents who participate in the production of pornography experience adverse, enduring effects.

2. Prolonged use of pornography increases beliefs that less common sexual practices are more common.

3. Pornography that portrays sexual aggression as pleasurable for the victim increases the acceptance of the use of coercion in sexual relations.

4. Acceptance of coercive sexuality appears to be related to sexual aggression.

The commission is cautious in its use of these conclusions, for the researchers themselves state:

Pornography has been consistently linked to changes in some perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors. These links, however, are circumscribed, few in number, and generally laboratory-based. To say that this means any observed effects are antifactual, however, would be in error. Pornography does have effects; it is just not yet known how widespread or powerful they really are. There is a clear lack of extensive knowledge or unifying theory, and global statements about the effects of exposure to pornography have not yet been substantiated. (Ibid., p. 35)

However, the commission does note that the conclusion of these studies support the position previously taken by the General Synod.

The research since 1978 offers further reason for concern, especially for children. This commission is especially troubled by the abuse of children and the images of sexuality transmitted to all children through pornography. In the first instance, children themselves are made direct victims of violence against their person. In the second instance, children are raised in a culture that condones the victimization of others. The producers of pornographic material defend their action by claiming the right to a free spread of ideas, including, one presumes, the idea that the sexual use of children is a healthy and proper expression of sexuality. While sensitive to the notion of the right to free expression as a means by which truth can emerge into the public domain, we reject the use of rights as a legitimate defense. Scripture offers a picture of an “inequality of rights.” The God revealed in history is a God of the widow and the orphan, that is, a God of the powerless, the victim. Jesus himself was Victim, standing in for all the world’s victims as evil did its worst. Thus, too, the church must stand on the side of children, vigorously supporting efforts to eradicate child pornography through the enforcement of labor laws, laws against child abuse, and the like.

The second abuse to children is the evergrowing availability of pornographic material to children. This is especially evident in the “video revolution” whereby young persons can enter video outlets to rent pornographic tapes for viewing on home video equipment.

The church’s response to this reality is of a different order than its response to the use of children themselves in pornography. We have often far too quickly responded negatively to any explicit sexual portrayal. Human sexuality is a gift to our nature. To call for the banning of all sexually explicit material would not be coherent with a Christian affirmation of our sexual nature. It would, in fact, be a denial of our human nature, the very humanness that God so fully and finally affirms in the Incarnation of his Son.

Thus congregations should support sexual education in the home, in the school, and most especially in the church. It is from within the community of faith that we can educate our children to choices made within the values that come to us as a people shaped by the God who is Lord of all of life. The General Program Council’s Office of Education and Faith Development can provide materials.

Congregations should also support those laws that require store owners to display the fact that they sell pornographic materials, and that such materials be made separate and off limits to minors.

The effects of pornography on children is not the only concern. Since pornography by definition dehumanizes the persons portrayed in its material, we resist its presence. Pornography distorts not only the humanness of women, but perverts the nature of the male-female relation, the very image of God (Genesis 1:27). The church cannot, in the name
of "rights," defend those who produce that which engenders violence against persons, being careful to remember that the violence in question is not the offense caused the viewer or reader or listener. At the same time, pornography must be recognized as a symptom of a societal sickness, a phenomenon that cannot be eliminated simply by sophisticated laws or rigorous prosecution. Until the alienation between persons—the loss of the God-given intimacy in which we are made to be human—is overcome, pornography will find fertile soil in which to take root.

The church's response must be twofold. First, the church is to conserve and proclaim the message that our true humanness is granted us in the community God makes with us. We place sexuality in the context of God's community with his people. Second, the church continues its proclamation of the kingdom of God, a society aborning in Jesus Christ, a kingdom not yet fully present. Because we hope to image this new society in the midst of the old, we participate in public discussions of how we best shape our present society to reflect this kingdom. The new order will be one where we need not engage in violence to attain our aims. It will include a profound respect for persons. Thus it will presume, through gospel proclaimed and enacted, to eliminate the roots of pornography. And because we envision this kingdom as taking societal shape, the church can urge the encodement of kingdom possibilities in those laws that can, consistent with the protection of the human person, restrict the production and display of pornography.

The commission recognizes that there is no quick nor morally easy solution to the availability of pornography. We urge that our churches and their members enter the public discussion concerning the sorts of values we desire our culture to bear. We do so boldly, exposing those forces that make for victims even as we support a culture in which healthy sexual expression can be enjoyed fully within the covenant of persons given us by God.

R-7.

R-8.
To instruct the General Program Council to prepare an education packet for distribution to the churches that will include: (1) resources for education in human sexuality for adults and children, (2) resources on the nature of sexual pornography, and (3) resources that offer possibilities for local action. (ADOPTED)

R-9.
To encourage RCA congregations to educate their members on the topic of sexuality from a Christian perspective. (ADOPTED)

R-10.
To urge RCA congregations to express their disapproval of the production and distribution of pornography as defined in this statement, through the support of local laws that will curtail its presence. (ADOPTED)

R-11.
To urge RCA congregations to engage in local public discussion on the presence and nature of pornography, affirming the value of persons, and promoting an understanding of sexuality consistent with the Christian faith. (ADOPTED)

R-12.
To urge RCA congregations to express pastoral care to victims of pornography. (ADOPTED)

R-13.
To distribute this statement to RCA congregations. (ADOPTED)