

Dear Congregation at Willoughby Church,

I just wanted to give you a heads up about the 10-part series we as a church will be entering into this Fall, “**Body Matters**”, beginning September 11.

Please do read this letter through to the end, especially if you are a parent of young or youngish kids.

The church is always living at the intersection of a story told by Scripture and potential counter stories told by the world. Today, one of the major intersections the church needs to stop at and be reflective about concerns the human body and the notion of human embodiment as a whole. For a wide range of reasons, the changes in our culture over the last fifty years has been nothing short of monumental, and the way we are thinking about and behaving with our bodies is radically different from years gone by. Premarital sex, living together before marriage, sexual norms, internet pornography, cybersex, technological advances that remove us from physical bodies . . . the list goes on.

As a pastor living in the age we’re living in, I feel I *must* in good faith, engage in these critical issues, whether I really want to or not. And I must encourage the believers in my care—you—to do likewise. Our Council agrees with this assessment, and has authorized me and the rest of the staff here at Willoughby into this task.

First Three Messages

What does it mean to be embodied creatures? What is a body? Why does it matter to think biblically about our bodies? What are the alternatives in thinking about the body that are on offer for us in the world, and especially in North American society today? Does God really care about our bodies and what we do with them? These foundation-laying questions will be taken up in the first three sermons of the series. Parents of young people need not worry too much about how graphic I’ll be in delivering these messages. They should be suitable for a ‘G’ (General) audience.

Next Four Messages

The next four messages in our series, however, will be more ‘PG’ to ‘PG13’. Issues such as marriage and divorce, premarital/extramarital sexual activity, biblical norms for male-female sexuality, and pornography will be taken up and looked at through the lens of Scripture. While I promise you that I will be as sensitive as I possibly can in how I speak to these questions throughout, as well as cognitive about varying viewpoints, I won’t be able to get through this middling portion of our series without referring to ‘sex’ and the like. The sermons certainly won’t be ‘R’ or ‘X-rated’, but I will need to be ‘real’ about these issues, and therefore, at times, a bit more explicit with my language.

Last Three Messages

The last three sermons will take up a few more pressing issues that concern the body, including the body and addiction, the body and death, and the body and suffering. I don’t foresee these topics being overly touchy for parents with kids, though again you will have to make that call.

Three Final Notices

1. **For parents of younger children and teens:** it is, of course, up to you to decide whether or not you want your kids in the service for the central four messages dealing with sexual issues. My own thinking and personal experience on the matter is that children in grade five and up (and maybe even earlier) are being increasingly exposed to explicit sexual content (heard of Instagram yet?). Various online media access to our children has completely changed the game. Some of them are even targeting children. Thus, we need be aware: if we don’t talk to our young children—and especially teens—about what the Bible says, our children will absorb our world’s stories and live out of them. The question is not ‘Will they be exposed to explicit material?’, but ‘When?’

* Should you determine, then, as a parent, that *the time for your child is 'not yet'*, there will be an alternative option for them during the service on October 2, 9, 16, and 23 to receive a more age-appropriate instruction about healthy boundaries.

2. **For all:** in order to facilitate dialogue, learning, and going deeper, we will be hosting **Sunday evening roundtable discussions, starting at 6pm with dinner**, from October 2–November 6 (excluding the Thanksgiving weekend, October 9). In order to help with this, we will be inviting speakers to come to speak *to* us (in some instances) and to *facilitate discussion* in taking the morning's message further (in other instances). Some of the keynote speakers we've got lined up (besides a handful of stellar folks from our own body) is Mary-Lee Bouma (CRC pastor and member of the newest study committee appointed by Synod 2016 to explore these matters further), and Dr. Margaret Cottle, who will speak to us about doctor-assisted suicide (see Dr. Cottle's credentials here: <https://cmda.org/staff/detail/margaret-cottle-md-ccfp>). Anthony Jansen, youth pastor at Gateway CRC in Abbotsford, will also be coming to guide us in a discussion about the challenges of internet porn and some practical advice about what we can do about it. You are all heartily invited to mark your calendars as "busy" for all of these Sunday nights!
3. **For Youth:** Included in these Sunday nights will be a focus on our youth group. Although we're sad that our new youth pastor, Curtis (and his wife Nicole) won't be with us yet, we're stoked that Julia Ravensbergen and some other leaders are willing to engage the youth during these Sunday evenings. The schedule for them is forthcoming.
4. **For all:** Throughout this series, focused as it is on 'Body Matters', we've decided it fitting and meaningful to share the 'Body' of Christ through communion, as a 'Body', with our bodies, every week throughout this series. Many Reformed congregations are returning to this ancient practice as the norm of their worship services. Receiving communion for ten weeks in a row throughout this series will position us to assess whether this is something we also, as a Reformed congregation, would ever want to do.

Thanks for your time and attention. We as a staff covet your prayers as we prepare for this series.

Pastor Ed