1. A significant aspect of healthy sexuality is proper decision making patterns for both spouses. Each of the couples introduced in Chapter One are asking important questions about sexuality in their marriages that are connected to decision making. Jenny and Steve need to find consensus and make decisions about the frequency of their sexual intimacy. Alex and his wife are exploring possible decisions about specific sexual practices, while Shannon and her husband are addressing boundaries and openness about sexual matters. Joshua and his wife are making decisions about how to teach their children about sexuality in dating and marriage. While there is important information available that can help couples be better informed, how you make decisions as a couple is just as important as what you decide.

2. We want our decisions about how we express ourselves sexually to meet with God’s approval. That is why the spiritual dimension of our sexual nature is particularly relevant to couple decision making. Our Father in Heaven has provided a “divine design” (Proclamation on the Family, paragraph 7) or pattern for couple decision making. Specifically, this includes who should be involved in couple decisions about sex, how such decisions should be made, and what criteria should be considered.

3. Who Should Be Involved

4. At times, a couple may seek advice from someone outside their marriage for a

decision they are making about their marriage. When we seek such counsel is a revealing indicator of whether or not we understand the nature of our marriage covenant. Elder Dallin H. Oaks has said:

5. I like to tell a young couple who are being married that in the marriage relationship they ought to look first to each other, as they do across the altar during their marriage—not first to their parents, not first to their siblings, not first to their friends, but in solving all their problems they should look first to one another (Worldwide Leadership Training Meeting, February 9, 2008, p.12).

6. When we do this first, we are striving to cleave to one another as spouses. If we eventually do seek counsel from a bishop, parent, or any other outside person, the best pattern is to go together to talk with that person. If both spouses are present, the couple can be unified in seeking and considering such outside advice. These patterns are particularly important in matters as personal as sex. Any solicited counsel should still be prayerfully and patiently considered by both spouses before making a decision.

7. How Decisions Should Be Made

8. The Proclamation on the Family reads:

9. By divine design, fathers are to preside over their families in love and righteousness and are responsible to provide the necessities of life and protection for their families. Mothers are primarily responsible for the nurture of their children. In these sacred responsibilities, fathers and mothers are obligated to help one another as equal partners (The Proclamation on the Family, paragraph 7).

10. These prophetic instructions teach us that marriage consists of specific, sacred
responsibilities that have been divinely given to husbands/fathers (to preside, provide, and protect), and to wives/mothers (to nurture); these are intertwined by the practice of equal partnership in marriage. It is in the proper integration of these responsibilities that the power and purposes of the Lord are manifested. Principles such as equal partnership, presiding, and nurturing, can be properly understood only in relation to one another. Each principle is interdependent of the other principles.

11. Equal partnership is the preeminent and overarching principle; presiding and nurturing are subservient to equal partnership. For example, presiding cannot eclipse equal partnership. So if a husband’s pattern of presiding does not reinforce his wife’s sense of equal partnership within the marriage, something is not right. Even though responsibilities may differ, the Lord intends for marriage to be one of true equality and partnership. The apostle Paul declared, “Neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord (I Corinthians 11:11). And President Gordon B. Hinckley taught:

12. In the marriage companionship there is neither inferiority nor superiority. The woman does not walk ahead of the man; neither does the man walk ahead of the woman. They walk side by side as a son and daughter of God on an eternal journey (Ensign, May 2002, p. 52).

13. Any notion of hierarchy—whether by vote or choice or priesthood or any other reason—where one spouse is put above or ahead of the other is contrary to God’s will.

14. Again, the divine triangle of marriage reflects that the ordinance of marriage includes two interdependent covenants: a covenant with God, and a covenant with our spouse. This “triangle covenant” helps us envision how a truly equal partnership can be maintained. We see that the source of authority resides outside both the husband and the wife; it resides with God and within the principles of the gospel.

15. Husbands and wives stand on level ground, and so together they should prayerfully seek the will of the Lord in order to make unified decisions.

16. Equal Counsel and Equal Consent

17. President Howard W. Hunter taught a pattern of marital decision making that includes both equal counsel and equal consent:

18. A man who holds the priesthood accepts his wife as a partner in the leadership of the home and family with full knowledge of and full participation in all decisions relating thereto. Of necessity there must be in the Church and in the home a presiding officer. By divine appointment, the responsibility to preside in the home rests upon the priesthood holder. The Lord intended that the wife be a helpmeet for man [“meet” means “equal”]—that is, a companion equal and necessary in full partnership. Presiding in righteousness necessitates a shared responsibility between husband and wife; together you act with knowledge and participation in all family matters (Ensign, November 1999, p. 49).

19. Notice President Hunter’s emphasis on “full knowledge,” “full participation,” and “full partnership” between husbands and wives in “all decisions” relating to family matters. He also taught that a helpmeet is very different than a help mate. Meet means equal, and such equality is the essence of a true partnership. Other Church leaders have also stressed the need for both equal counsel and equal consent in the marriage.
partnership. Speaking to husbands, President Boyd K. Packer taught:

20. When there is a family decision to be made that affects everyone, you and your wife together will seek whatever counsel you might need, and together you will prayerfully come to a unified decision. If you ever pull priesthood rank on her you will have failed (Quoted by C. Broderick in One Flesh, One Heart: Putting Celestial Love Into Your Temple Marriage, 1986, p. 32).

21. The Lord’s pattern of marital decision making involves husbands and wives prayerfully coming to a unified decision—unified with each other and unified with the Lord.

22. Proper Sources of Revelation

23. Most of the common questions we are asked by young adults and couples are inquiries about Church doctrine on specific aspects of marital sexuality. They want to know the “Church’s official stance” on a certain sexual practice, or other specific aspect of marital sexuality. Examples include: “What is the Church’s official stance on oral sex?” “Does the Church approve of wearing lingerie?” and “Do you have to put your temple garments back on right after sex, or is it all right to sleep together naked after sex?”

24. It is very common for couples to express that they have been searching for the official church position related to their question, but they haven’t been able to find one. We often respond that there are general principles that have been revealed by prophets that couples should seriously consider when making personal marital decisions, but rarely is there an official church position or doctrine that directs couples in the specifics of such intimate issues. As the Doctrine and Covenants teaches, “These things remain with you to do according to judgment and the directions of the Spirit” (D&C 62:8). It is important to note that this is the same pattern the Church wants us to use for questions regarding birth control and family planning, frequency of temple worship, specifics of Sabbath day observance, calculation of tithing, time spent in church callings, and other specific aspects of personal and family decision making. The Prophet Joseph Smith said, “I teach them correct principles and they govern themselves.”

25. Even though there may be some Church teachings or information from professionals that can inform a couple’s decision making around the specifics of their marital sexuality, hoping to find an official stance of the Church on these matters reveals that they believe that the answers lie outside of—rather than within—their relationship. Couples should have confidence that the best answers to such specific questions come from within their relationship rather than outside of it. By first “turning toward” each other, spouses are more responsive and attentive, and can make wiser choices that are based on their own personal needs, desires, and experiences rather than by using outside comparisons. Such introspection as a couple places the focus on motives and intents of their sexual desires and expressions—not just behaviors; they consider what they want to do, but they should also consider why they want to do it.

26. In a recent general conference address, Elder Dallin H. Oaks encouraged church members to use proper sources of revelation in their personal decision-making.

27. The personal line is of paramount importance in personal decisions and in the governance of the family. Unfortunately, some members of our church underestimate
the need for this direct, personal line. Responding to the undoubted importance of prophetic leadership—the priesthood line, which operates principally to govern heavenly communications on Church matters—some seek to have their priesthood leaders make personal decisions for them, decisions they should make for themselves by inspiration through their personal line. Personal decisions and family governance are principally a matter for the personal line...

28. We must use both the personal line and the priesthood line in proper balance to achieve the growth that is the purpose of mortal life. If personal religious practice relies too much on the personal line, individualism erases the importance of divine authority. If personal religious practice relies too much on the priesthood line, individual growth suffers. The children of God need both lines to achieve their eternal destiny. The restored gospel teaches both, and the restored Church provides both (Ensign, Nov. 2010, pp. 83-86, emphasis added).

29. Marital sexuality is perhaps the ultimate example where decisions should be primarily guided by the inspired personal line. As sex educators and therapists, our experience indicates that too many young adults and married couples are seeking to have priesthood leaders—whether living or dead—make these personal decisions for them. Couples should foster a pattern of making personal decisions within the divine triangle of their marriage. They would be wise to focus on the reasons and motives of their proposed choices, and avoid seeking a one-size-fits-all prescribed model of marital sexuality that has purposely never been given by our prophetic leaders. These types of decisions are best left between the husband and the wife, as they counsel with the Lord.

30. This personal—even private—approach to decision making strongly infers that couples should also maintain proper boundaries around the specifics of their marital sexuality. Making comparisons with other couples is rarely helpful. We cannot think of any good that could come from learning about the specifics of sex in other people’s marriages—they are not you. In fact, learning about the details of other’s sexuality patterns may be detrimental to a couple’s sexual relationship as it may influence them to mimic those patterns, rather than be responsive to the needs and desires of one another. Almost nothing else is as personal and private as your sexual preferences and patterns. Therefore, your sexual relationship should be tailored to your spouse, and not influenced by outside expectations or comparisons.

31. Principles of Sexual Decision Making

32. We close this chapter by suggesting four principles of sexual decision making in marriage. Each is paired with a key question couples can discuss. Each principle and question can be used when considering a specific sexual decision or a specific encounter, when examining broader sexual patterns in the relationship.

33. Principle 1: Marital Unity

34. Does this strengthen our relationship with each other and with God?

35. As we discussed in Chapter Three, the two divine purposes of sex are procreation and the strengthening of unity between spouses. If spouses focus on this in their sexual expressions with each other, they can reinforce their alignment with God and His plan of happiness. The image of the divine
triangle should inspire couples to make unity the primary focus of their sexual expressions. At times, marital unity can be strengthened by sexual exploration, creativity, fun, passion, and enjoyment in seeing the sexual responses in our own body as well as our spouse’s body. At other times, however, unity can be strengthened by sexual restraint, where spouses share emotional or non-arousing forms of intimacy, rather than arousing sexuality.

36. Principle 2: Couple Consensus

37. Do we agree on this aspect of our marital sexuality?

38. The divinely prescribed principles of cleaving and equal partnership obligate couples to seek a mutually agreeable and mutually satisfying pattern of sexuality in their marriages. Spouses should never manipulate or try to force their partner to engage in anything sexual with which they are not comfortable, or to which they do not consent. Spouses should try to understand the differences in their sexual preferences, and make decisions that champion their spouse’s happiness and preferences, and not just their own. This principle places a high premium on communication—both during and after sex—where couples can negotiate and find consensus on specific aspects of their intimacy.

39. Principle 3: Positive Attitudes

40. Does this reflect a positive and healthy attitude about sexuality?

41. When differences about sexuality arise in a marriage, one or both spouses may question why they are uncomfortable with, or do not desire, something that their partner desires. So when this happens, it is enlightening if spouses try to identify the origin of their discomfort or their lack of desire. Sometimes these different preferences are merely situational, such as not being in the mood, or feeling tired, sick, or preoccupied; and other differences may be more lasting.

42. Many spouses have acquired rather negative attitudes about sexual expression that may have started years earlier in family experiences, or from other sources prior to or outside of their marriage. Such differences may also be tied to healthy inhibitions or unhealthy inhibitions. Healthy inhibitions are connected to a spouse’s personal preferences for sexual experience, and also reflect his or her values about sexuality. Healthy inhibitions are balanced by otherwise positive attitudes about sexuality, and a general willingness to engage in desired forms of sexual encounters and arousal. Unhealthy inhibitions are usually expressions of negative sexual conditioning which originated from past experiences or from external influences—rather than genuine personal preferences. Spouses with unhealthy inhibitions tend to avoid creativity in sexual encounters, and are often uncomfortable with their own sexual response—regardless of the specific type of arousal or stimulation.

43. Principle 4: Sexual Potential

44. Does this foster the sexual needs of my spouse and myself?

45. In sexual decision-making, couples should accept that the truth that some sexual preferences originate from innate sexual needs—not just personal desires. As we have highlighted in our model of sexual wholeness, our innate sexual nature gives each of us the capacity and desire for meaningful sexual experiences. In a marriage, each spouse individually, as well as the couple itself, has a divinely created
sexual potential; healthy sexuality is fostered when spouses seek to share such sexual potential together. This process requires openness, vulnerability, and creativity in learning to share the sexual part of themselves with one another. This becomes a significant contributor to a rich, whole, and satisfying marriage.

46. Questions to Ponder:

47. How do I maintain the “rites of marriage” within my relationship?

48. How is my partnership based on equality? Do we counsel with each other on family issues, and give our consent and support to the final decision?

49. Is our personal decision making done within the context of the divine triangle?

50. Do I tend to make sexual decisions based on true principles or on situational whims?