

# Something to Talk About

## A conversation guide for church leaders

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May 1, 2019

### It Won't Happen Here

*Note: This is one of a series of articles intended to facilitate and guide church leaders' conversations about significant issues that often are not talked about among pastors, boards, and church leadership teams.*

Prior articles can be found at <https://efcawest.efcadistrict.org/church-leadership/> or <https://efcawest.efcadistrict.org/something-to-talk-about-archives/>.

None of us think it will happen to us or will happen here. Yet, it happens all too frequently and each time it has happened, it happened to someone at someplace. I'm writing about sexual misconduct and sexual abuse of church members, and I'm writing to you, church leader. It can happen to you and your church.

After years of public revelations about sexual abuse in the Roman Catholic church and months of stories about goings on at Willow Creek and other churches, the Southern Baptist Convention has recently been dealing with revelations about the number of church clergy/staff among their churches with histories of allegations of sexual abuse. In many minds, including mine, the issues that arise are not only how any specific allegation or incident is handled today, but also how such issues were dealt with in the past including reports that such allegations have often been swept under the rug with the perpetrator being allowed to continue in paid ministry, usually at another church. I desperately want to believe it won't happen to my church or involve any of our leaders. But it will happen again somewhere. Which church, denomination or organization is going to be the next?

The devastating personal, organizational, spiritual and Kingdom impacts of such allegations makes this topic something to talk about.

It is impossible to prevent sexual misconduct by someone who is hell-bent on committing it, but churches and church leaders still need to build safeguards against it. We need to be on guard for the flock we shepherd realizing that some wolves arise from within our own selves. Church leaders need to be proactive in establishing reasonable policies and procedures to guard

against such abuse as well as have a plan in place to guide them should such an allegation be made. Here are some questions that can jump start your conversation.

- In the history of your church, have you ever had an allegation of sexual misconduct against a staff member or ministry volunteer? If yes, what were the allegations, what did you do about them, and what were the results? Would you do anything differently were it to happen today?
- If your church has no history of dealing with sexual misconduct, consider the experience from another church you may know about or that you have read about and ask yourselves the same questions above.
- Many churches and leaders have adopted what has been known as the Billy Graham rule (a man never alone with a woman not his spouse and a woman never alone with a man not her spouse and the reverse). What are the strengths and weaknesses of this approach? Should you build on the strengths and mitigate the weaknesses or do something else? In this age of same-sex relationships and abuse, what should we do about potential same-sex sexual misconduct?
- Does our church have a “no charge may be brought against the pastor or an elder except by two or more witnesses” provision in its governance documents? How might such a provision be viewed by a victim of unwitnessed sexual misconduct or abuse by a pastor or elder? How might a jury view the church’s assertion that they care about caring for victims when they see this policy in court? Should we make changes?
- Have an honest discussion about whether we leaders have a bias to, at least initially, act as though we believe a victim’s allegation or a staff member’s or elder’s denial. Is it even possible to have no bias one way or the other when receiving an allegation?
- Have we ever told our congregation about our policies and procedures to prevent sexual abuse? How would they know what staff/leader behavior is inappropriate and how to report it? How would a person who has been victimized know that it is safe to report misconduct and how to do it? What should we do?
- Who is responsible to provide oversight of our church’s efforts to minimize the potential for sexual abuse or misconduct?
- Do we have a pre-determined plan for how to handle an allegation of sexual misconduct? Who are our “mandatory reporters” under state and local law and under what circumstances is reporting mandatory? Will we voluntarily report allegations of potential criminal acts to proper authorities even if not mandated to do so? If not a criminal allegation, how will we investigate an allegation of sexual misconduct? Will we do so ourselves or engage a third party – if a third party, who? Under what circumstances will we relieve a person of ministry responsibilities pending an investigation?
- How do we do background checks for staff and ministry volunteers? How can we ensure that they do not have a record of ministerial misconduct? If we license or ordain ministers in-house, how do we do background checks?

Since none of us can predict when or where a sexual misconduct allegation will arise, it is important that every church and every church leadership team have its act together before the situation arises. When we are dealing with the initial grief, shame, disbelief, and anxiety of the

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moment is not a great time for church leaders to begin strategic thinking about a course of action. Have a plan and review it annually. Preventing and dealing with sexual misconduct in the church is timely, important, and something to talk about.

*Let us know if we can help and how your conversation goes.  
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