

SOMETHING TO TALK ABOUT

A conversation guide for church leaders

He Did What?!?!?

Handling Staff Public Misconduct

After 38 years working in policing and another 8 years working with churches, nothing surprises me anymore. Let me restate that: Nothing that some person somewhere might do surprises me; but I am still at times surprised when *that* person, a particular person I know, does something really, really stupid. We far too often see people in positions of leadership and trust do things that are stupid and sinful that disqualify them or cause their removal from ministry. When we read about it happening somewhere else, we sigh and recognize that some people do those things. When it happens to a pastor, staff member, or leader in our own church, that's when it catches us by surprise. And because we need to be prepared to handle the situation even though we are caught off guard and by surprise, it is definitely something to talk about.

The type of misconduct I am writing about in this article is *public* misconduct. It includes things that people do to other people as well as misconduct that, typically, everyone knows is wrong and is known to the public. It is not about work standards or quality misconduct such as not completing assignments, being hard to work with or insubordinate, falling off the approved doctrinal wagon, and the myriad of other "behind the scenes" misbehaviors or incompetencies that result in people being removed from their positions.

In general, there are two predominant forms of public misconduct. One form includes offenses against the church such as theft and embezzlement that comes to light. The second form includes offenses against people. Among the most notorious forms are those that have sexual overtones. This second type of offenses are the focus of this article.

Because none of us expect this type of public misconduct by a staff member or other leader in the church, it is important to have in mind at least a rudimentary plan to reference when such incidents arise. Here are some suggestions for starting your conversation.

- Do not handle this alone. When something like this occurs to us, we typically have our thinking at least a little clouded by being so close to the situation and having some emotional attachment. Clouded thinking is not a leadership failure. It is a manifestation of being human. Make some phone calls *immediately* to some people outside your church to get counsel and assistance. Among those we suggest contacting are your district

superintendent or staff member and your insurance agent. The district staff has unfortunately dealt with these situations before and can provide valuable insight and strategies to help you handle the incident. Your insurance agent can provide very helpful advice because they have a big motivation to do so – they do not want to pay out a large civil judgment because a church leader made a well-intentioned mistake in responding to such an incident. Your insurance agent may also be able to quickly connect you with legal counsel to assist in your response. Discuss who on your team will be responsible or authorized to make these calls and ensure you have contact information available.

- If the incident involves sexual misconduct or any form of abuse, *do not minimize or rationalize the behavior*. Included in this category of misconduct are all forms of inappropriate touching, verbal or electronic communication, or comments or actions of a sexual nature. It is pretty rare for church staff to be involved in non-sexual abuse, but it is all too common to learn of sexual misconduct. We recommend strongly considering the immediate removal of the alleged perpetrator from work duties pending the outcome of an investigation if the basic facts are in dispute. If the alleged perpetrator confesses, immediate termination is recommended. There is no warning or second chance for continued employment or leadership for that person – at least for a long, long time. Why? Because those types of behaviors do not jump out from nowhere – they have been bouncing around in their brains for a long time. In several of these incidents in which I have had personal involvement, the perpetrator confessed to the one incident we knew of and denied any other incidents, only to have it come to light that the person was a serial offender. Assume there may well be more victims.

Discuss how you would go about finding someone or an agency outside your church to conduct such an inquiry/investigation. Do not investigate these incidents yourself. Virtually no one believes an “unfounded” assessment of allegations based on an organization’s investigation of itself.

Depression, falling off the sobriety wagon and other excuses should not impact continued employment decisions. These may be *reasons* that led to the perpetrator acting out his/her evil intentions, but they do not *excuse* those intentions or actions.

- “What about showing grace to the sinner?” you may ask, and I’m glad you did. One of the mistakes that church leaders often make in these situations is yielding to the strong desire to show grace to an offender we know and otherwise like. The mistake we make is that we need to show more than grace. God calls us to display, among other things other than grace, love, mercy, and justice. We need to display those things not only to the perpetrator that has said they repented of their misdeeds, but also to those victimized by his/her misdeeds. We recommend that the church leaders demonstrate grace, mercy, and justice to a perpetrator *after* removing him/her from leadership and that they do not forget to do at least the same, if not more so, to those victimized by those actions.

- Don't assume the negative impact is local or confined to only the people involved. Let's be real – most lecherous misconduct in our culture is perpetrated by men against women. We sometimes forget that it is not only the woman directly involved that is hurt. Such misconduct hurts every woman in the church (and those outside who hear of it). It causes our younger women and girls to fear that they are viewed as objects by church leaders rather than as people created in the image of God. When addressing the hurt caused by sexual misconduct, don't forget the significant, harmful ripple effect it has on everyone else.

If you engage in congregational prayer regarding the incident, remember to pray for everyone involved, not just the wayward leader and our own church. We recommend that announcements and prayer times should not be recorded or distributed as part of your on-line presence. If you need to make a comment for distribution broader than the church family, consult with an attorney and keep it separate from the worship service.

- Communicate clearly and succinctly to the congregation. Don't provide the gory details that some may want or demand – assuaging people's voyeuristic inclinations and desires to know the gory details is not helpful to anyone. When making an announcement to the congregation, choose your words carefully, write them down, and then read what you wrote to the congregation. This is not a time to make extemporaneous comments. Be brief and be done. Remember that any disciplinary hearing or meeting with the congregation needs to be restricted to members only.
- The first and most effective step in damage control is to remove the offender when the basic character of the facts is not in question. When the facts are in question, immediately removing the person from their duties pending an outside inquiry is the next best thing. If the event is public, you will be thoroughly trashed in social media. Expect it. Consider developing a brief statement that you can post or use as a reply that communicates that you are aware of the situation, the perpetrator has been removed from ministry, known victims are being served well, and that you take this issue seriously. Depending on the facts of the matter, and with advice of counsel, consider reaching out to the person directly victimized by the conduct with your sincere apology and offers to provide whatever assistance you can to make things right. The sooner you can do this, the less grief you will likely bear. Obedience to God is a higher priority than legal litigation avoidance, but don't be foolish. Most church leaders have no experience dealing in the civil litigation arena, so consulting with those that do is important.

Discuss among yourselves how you might determine the appropriate communication of information to interested/concerned parties. How will you connect with legal counsel if needed? Immediately after the event is not the time to begin searching for assistance.

Public misconduct by church leaders can be catastrophic for a church and all those involved, and it hurts the reputation of our God and Savior. We need to be alert to prevent it if possible, and we must handle it well should it occur. We get only one chance to do so. The best advice we can give is to take it seriously, act quickly and decisively (but not hurriedly), communicate

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well, protect others, care for the victim as well (if not better) than the perpetrator, don't go it alone, and know who you are going to call. It's something to talk about and guard against.

*Let us know if we can help and how your conversation goes.
Contact Bob Osborne by e-mail at bob.osborne@efca.org.*

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://efca-west.districts.efca.org/something-to-talk-about-archives>