

Something to Talk About – A conversation guide for church leaders

By Bob Osborne, EFCA West
Director of Church Leadership and Organizational Development
(bob@efcawest.org)

June 1, 2015

Domestic Violence, Infidelity, and Sexual Assault – Caring for Victims, Perpetrators, and the Church.

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. This article is not intended as legal advice and is not to be used as such. Always consult competent legal counsel when confronted by these types of situations.

Prior articles can be found at www.efcawest.org. Click on the Church Leadership tab to get to the archive.

It's always a surprise. We're unprepared and not quite sure what to do. Our stomachs churn.

We have just been informed of a church member's arrest for domestic violence – or a member's infidelity – or a member alleged to have committed sexual crimes against children. It's a mess, and we don't know what to do.

Unfortunately, these things happen in our fallen world. The fallen people in our churches, even leaders, sometimes do such things. And, it's something we should talk about.

Lots of churches and church leaders get themselves into relational and even serious legal predicaments involving these types of incidents. It is extremely important that leaders don't craft their response strategy on their own. *Our default recommendation is that church leaders consult with their insurance agent and attorney prior to making any public statements or taking other affirmative action.*

Because laws and court decisions change frequently, we can inadvertently create serious problems for ourselves and the church by relying upon dated counsel or periodicals (including this article). Consult with competent counsel every time.

Typically, church leaders need to be prepared to address four main issues:

- Do we need to report this to governmental authorities?
- How do we care for those involved?
- What, if anything, should we communicate to the church family?
- How do we protect the church family from liability?

Every incident is unique, so there's no one-size-fits-all response (one-size never fits all anyway...). Yet, there are some principles that should be considered when a church leadership team is confronted with this type of situation including the following.

- Church leaders may feel angry toward alleged perpetrators. We need to remember that actions taken in anger will not achieve the righteousness of God (James 1:20). Take a deep breath.
- Slow down. There is seldom any real need to rush to do anything unless a person's safety is in peril.
- Each state has laws regarding mandatory reporting of certain criminal acts. Your insurer or attorney should be able to provide church staff, board members, and leaders of ministry teams with guidance regarding who are mandatory reporters and what must be reported in your state. Be sure to address this as failure to comply with mandatory reporting requirements can result in huge financial liability if not criminal sanctions.
- Identify those who will need special care in the days, weeks, and months to come.
 - The perpetrator, especially if repentant, must be cared for. Remember, people sometimes are accused of crimes or behaviors they did not actually do. Don't rush to judgement. An accused person who heeds their attorney's advice to not talk about their case should not be presumed guilty.
 - Victims need to be cared for. This includes children and may include close friends and other relatives. Consider pre-identifying wise, mature women in the church who can assist women involved in these situations. Women who minister in this way need not only access to but also influence with the church leadership team. Men often go into "fix-it" mode and can be blind to the long-term and deep emotional hurts and needs of women and children victimized in these ways.
 - If a family's bread-winner is in jail, it is important to address the financial problems that family members will quickly face. Consider providing someone to the family to assist with managing their finances, living within their newly-defined means, and serving as liaison for the family regarding any benevolence funding the church may be able to provide.
 - Remember that caring for one another includes more than providing practical assistance and advice. We also need to invest our time weeping with those who weep (Romans 12:15). Church leaders, in their desire to provide needed practical assistance, sometimes forget to address the emotional support needs of those involved.
 - If a repentant sinner returns to the church family, rejoice. But, remember that the emotional hurts and needs of victims continue and often go deeper than just forgiving. Their forgiveness may deal with bitterness and vengeance, but often does not address their ongoing personal and deep emotional pain.
- If it is necessary to communicate something to the church at large, consider identifying one person who will do the communicating. Have any public statements reviewed by your insurance agent/attorney prior to making the announcement. Avoid announcing details that others do not need to know. There are various laws concerning what information may be provided to media or the public related to certain crimes and certain victims and perpetrators. Know these laws before considering identifying any involved parties.
 - Consider having an elder read the announcement to the church, and then have the preaching pastor address the situation from a pastoral perspective. This may help the church better differentiate between the situation and their response.
 - Remember, just because someone asks a question does not mean it needs to be answered. Address specific and real concerns, but don't feed curiosity.
 - If an event involves staff or is otherwise widely-known, the congregation generally feels better when church leaders address them soon after the event. Consider at a minimum letting them know that an event occurred, that the leadership team is aware of it and

they are involved in its resolution, and encourage the congregation to avoid temptations toward conjecture and gossip. Encourage generalized prayer – it is not always necessary to identify those involved. If appropriate, let folk know that the allegations do not arise from any church ministry or activity – this is a question that many in the church will have.

- Avoid making any announcement without advising those victimized in advance. Be attuned to their concerns. “Damage control” by church leaders can feel like abandonment to families and victims – include them whenever possible in the communication decisions and always keep in mind how our actions will be felt by them.
- When dealing with a physical/sexual abuse incident involving children, determine whether the accused has been involved in working with children or youth in the church either currently or in times past. Be prepared for additional allegations to arise against an alleged offender once the word gets out. If there is any history of an alleged offender working with children or youth at the church, let your insurer/attorney know immediately and follow their advice – don’t wait for an accusation to be made.

Church leaders should expect that, at some time in the life of the church, they will face a situation involving domestic violence, infidelity, sexual assaults, or similar incidents. People look toward church leaders for support and assistance with the spiritual, practical, and emotional aftermath.

Are we ready to respond to these tragic events with godly wisdom, understanding, and discernment?

That’s something to talk about.

Let us know how your conversation goes. Contact Bob Osborne by e-mail at bob@efcawest.org.