

# NO MORE DON'T ASK, DON'T TELL

What we expect from leaders, why we name specific sins, and how that's working out.

by Kevin Miller

**T**he youth ministry made us do it. About five years ago, Keith, our youth pastor then, noticed that each year, when he taught the youth group about avoiding the seductive pull of pornography, a youthworker would show up in his office the next day. "How am I supposed to minister to youth," the leader would ask, "when I have the exact same problem? I've struggled for a long time, and I finally want to get help . . . Have I disqualified myself from being a small group leader?"

Or during a retreat, after the kids were asleep, a volunteer would detail his past weekend: he had drunk too much and made out with a woman he'd just met and wasn't planning to date. Apparently, this non-committal recreation was fine with him.

Another youthworker was having sex with his roommate.

As a seminary prof might say, a few of our youthworkers "held divergent views on moral theology." When Keith would ask a youthworker to live a chaste life, most responded well, but others protested: "I



## GOT MATURITY?

don't see what's wrong with what I'm doing," or "I don't do it that often," or "It's not that big a deal." If he then asked an unrepentant volunteer to step down from leading, some responded maturely, but others—some of whom were popular with kids—told the youth they'd been forced out for no reason. As you'd guess, this caused damage, doubts, and dissension.

Keith realized, *I need to get leaders on the same page before they begin.* So in the application process he began making clear: "For someone leading our youth, there are lifestyle expectations. If a youth leader is using pornography, drinking to excess, or sleeping with someone, we ask that he or she confess that to the youth pastor and seek to change."

"This made it a lot easier to talk about," Keith says, "and it set off the bombs before a leader built close relationships with the kids." Ten percent of the applicants went straight into a restoration process rather than into leading young people.

Next, our worship arts pastor, Steve, modified Keith's document and began using it with musicians. In 2008, we modified the document again and applied it to our prayer ministers. Last year, we took the huge step and asked nearly all our volunteer ministry leaders to sign this "Lifestyle Policy for Those in Public Ministry." (See page 41.)

When I tell pastors from other churches about this, most look at me wide-eyed. I can tell they're thinking, *You crazy fool, venturing where angels fear to tread.* They pepper me with questions: Who has to sign the document? Do you actually name specific sins? Which sins go on the list—and how in the world do you decide that? How do you explain why you're asking people to sign this? What happens to someone who can't sign it?

Let me try to answer those questions, and I'll talk honestly about what's happened in our church since we've implemented the moral-lifestyle policy for volunteer leaders. Hear me out to the end, and you'll either find yourself inspired or grateful you haven't tried it.

### Who has to sign the document?

Not every volunteer at Resurrection must sign the moral-lifestyle policy. That's a critical point, one not to miss. We want to communicate two truths simultaneously: (1) you can struggle with anything and serve in this church, no matter where you are in your journey, but (2) to pastor

those who are vulnerable, to lead, or to teach, we ask for more, as Scripture does (James 3:1; 1 Timothy 3).

Who falls into this second group? First, those who lead the vulnerable—children's ministry leaders, youth leaders, and prayer ministers. Then, those who teach—preachers, teachers of adult and children's classes, leaders of small groups. And those who lead—our pastors, board members, and leaders of various ministries, like men's and women's. We include those who lead worship—musicians, choir members, Scripture readers, Communion servers. We tell our musicians: "You're leading God's people in worship, so your role is one of spiritual leadership. We want our congregation to know that the people leading them don't look Christian on Sunday but act differently on Monday."

That still leaves many open positions for people who are struggling more deeply; we want them to connect to the community through service. They can help with men's and women's ministries, host small groups, usher, greet, serve on the sound team, help with hospitality, and so on.

### Which sins go on the list—and why?

We debated this for months. We know acutely that we all are sinners (Rom. 3:9-19) and that Jesus saved his hardest words for religious leaders who crush people with impossible demands (Matt. 23:4). The principles that helped us move forward were these:

1. We aren't trying to create a comprehensive list of what God cares about, because he's already done that (in the Bible). We aren't even creating a comprehensive list of what our church cares about. What we're doing instead is listing several "leading indicators" of the condition of someone's soul—particularly live issues for our leaders in our church right now. This means that your church's list, if you develop one, can and should look different from ours.

For example, when our list began, it included a high percentage of sexual sins, because among our youth leaders, those were common leading indicators of a soul moving out of obedience to God. Now the list includes issues seen more in adults later in life, like physical and verbal abuse of others.

2. We want to watch for issues that could endanger our people. As Resurrection has grown, it's become harder for our pastors to know each person's struggles. But our responsibility to protect the flock hasn't lessened. So we weren't willing to settle for "Don't ask, don't tell." The one place that many churches get

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**CHURCH OF THE RESURRECTION**  
**Lifestyle Policy**  
**For Those in Public Ministry**

James 5:15-16: "And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective."

Especially for our leaders and for those in public ministry (James 3:1; I Timothy 3), we desire personal holiness and accountability, repentance, healing, and restoration. Whenever you fall into sin, as pastoral leaders we are eager to walk with you, to help you amend your life and to walk in the light (I John 1:5-8).

We ask our leaders and those involved in public ministry, to flee from the behaviors listed below. If any of these have been a problem within the past 12 months, please schedule a time with your pastoral leader to have a conversation around the best way forward in this ministry:

- Consuming too much alcohol and/or driving under the influence of alcohol
- Use of illegal drugs or illegal use of prescription drugs
- Guilty of a felony or misdemeanor charge
- Physical or verbal abuse against anyone
- Viewing pornographic material
- Addictive or binge patterns of eating, shopping, or other activity
- A sexual encounter with (including online encounters), or sleeping with, anyone other than your spouse
- Any sexual touching without a committed relationship
- Consistent or recurring lying or deceit
- Other sins that compromise your Christian walk

**Commitment:** If I am involved in any of these activities, I will meet with my pastoral leader to arrange a formal confession and to follow guidance on how to amend my life. And I will regularly participate in confession, either the sacrament of confession to a priest and/or pastoral confession to my ministry leader, clergy person, prayer minister, or friend.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Print Name: \_\_\_\_\_



## GOT MATURITY?

serious about expectations for leaders is a child-protection program—yet while they run a criminal background check, they may never ask direct questions about the person's lifestyle.

Some of the most wounded people I've ever met are those who were abused by religious leaders—pastors, elders, youthworkers, camp counselors. I can't bear the thought that someone in my church would suffer that fate, because we weren't willing to ask about signs that something is amiss.

3. We want to list issues that would damage our people's trust in leadership. No one in our congregation thinks for one minute that our leaders are sinless. They don't expect that. But they do expect basic integrity. So we want to list issues that—if they were left unaddressed and then became publicly known—would cause people to think, *How could they be so duplicitous?*

Despite the challenges in creating a list, we've found, as our worship arts pastor put it, "The specificity of the document is what makes the whole thing work. Christians can easily get comfortable with their sin, and if they aren't asked about it, they're fine. But if they are asked, they don't want to lie."

### How do you explain this to people?

We rolled out the moral-lifestyle policy with some fear and trepidation. One staff member cautioned, "If we do this, we're going to quadruple the need for pastoral care." Others said, "This is bound to get messy."

But the staff finally decided, "We believe in this enough to dive in and try it. Do we want to enter the mess and try to work out the problems, or do we want to explain in eternity why we didn't bother to disciple people?"

We found that how the moral-lifestyle policy was rolled out was crucial. We needed to carefully explain what it was and why we were using it. In large-group meetings and in one-on-one conversations, here were our themes:

\* The Bible calls leaders to a higher standard (1 Timothy 3; James 3:1).

\* This is for the protection of our people. It's prudent to ask, "What do we require of people who are over others and influencing their lives?"

\* We believe in transformation—and that begins with confession and accountability. We believe you do not have to live with persistent sins forever. Transformation can take place, but not until you confess your sins and work with someone to develop a plan

for your ongoing care and discipleship.

\* This is not about legalism but about living a confessional and accountable lifestyle. It's not for condemnation but transformation. It's not punitive. Just because you have one of the issues listed on the policy doesn't automatically mean you'll be removed from ministry; it means we're asking you to talk with a pastor. We want to have conversations with you that will lead you toward greater maturity in Christ. So it's a discipleship tool: not, "You're not pure and holy enough," but "Let us help you continue to be transformed into the holiness of God."

Even with a fully-orbed explanation, our leaders asked several good, probing questions:

"Why aren't we just as concerned about such-and-such sin or issue?" For example, one leader asked, "Why don't we list 'Have not been involved with the poor?'"

(Answer: We tried to capture the predominant current pastoral issues in our congregation.)

But this is a good idea that we'll definitely consider when we review and possibly revise the list.)

"Why are we having a discussion about X? I feel there are bigger problems in my life I should be talking about, so why are we getting nitty-gritty?"

(Answer: A small issue may signal a larger problem; "he who is faithful in little will be faithful in much.")

"Are we becoming legalistic?"

Members who came from churches they felt were legalistic wanted to make sure we weren't headed in that direction. (Answer: The key is all in what you do with the policy. It doesn't automatically exclude people; instead, it calls them to confession, forgiveness, and increased pastoral care. It's an open door to discipleship.)

### What's happened?

The moral-lifestyle policy has created some amazing pastoral conversations and, I say this soberly, led to breakthroughs in people's lives.

Of the roughly 125 people who were asked to sign the policy, about 40 have come to meet with a pastor. Most arrive nervous, unsure how to start the conversation, and embarrassed. As they begin to get out their sin, though, they are able to relax and talk about things "I've never told anyone before." Each conversation involves (a) an honest confession of sin, (b) a declaration of Christ's forgiveness for all who repent and turn to him (1 John 1:9), and (c) the development of a pastoral-care plan, various measures that

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will help the person grow stronger, with fewer falls and faster rises. Invariably, leaders walk away saying, "Thank you so much. I am so glad this church takes it seriously. Thank you for helping me get help. I would not have come if this policy hadn't been here."

The most common issue has been using pornography. Given that 80 percent of our church's adults are under age 40, most of our leaders have never known a world in which internet porn wasn't one click away. One leader came to confess he'd had a fall with internet porn. "I'm fully prepared for you to pull me from being leader of this team," he said.

But by asking a few questions, the pastor discovered he had already put in place various safeguards. He had let slip checking with his sponsor every day, but he committed to begin doing that again, and to change from a smart-phone to one incapable of surfing the web. "I'm not going to pull you from leadership," the pastor told him, "because you're committed to these steps, and service is doing you good and keeping you connected. In fact, I can see that you have the gifts and calling for pastoral leadership in the future."

This leader left relieved and thankful and more prepared to resist sin.

What does a pastoral-care plan involve? I've written about this in Leadership (See "Church Discipline for Repetitive Sin," at LeadershipJournal.net), and noted that "Each penitent, like each patient, requires a different type and dose of medicine." Karen, our executive pastor, explains, "Some people we ask to meet with a pastor every month or two, others to email weekly with updates on how they're doing. Some we ask to meet with a Christian counselor, others with a prayer minister. Some we ask to not date for six months, others we ask to join an accountability group or attend healing services."

As part of their pastoral-care plan, only a few people have been asked to step down or serve in places that do not require signing the document. When considering that, we use questions like these to guide us:

1. Is the person contrite about what he's done or still confused as to whether it's really all that bad? Sin, by its nature, is self-deceptive. If the person is still protesting, "I've got it under control," or "I don't see why you're making such a big deal about this," we're more likely to ask him or her to step down. But if the person is clear that he or she has sinned, we're more likely to develop a pastoral-care plan and leave him or her in place.

2. Are they a risk to the people in their care? Physical abuse, looking at child porn, forcible sexual encounters—these sins must be taken as signs the person could harm those around them, and would almost certainly lead to someone being asked to step down and to serve in other, carefully bounded roles, and definitely not in children's or youth ministry. Of course, we'd stay connected to the person pastorally.

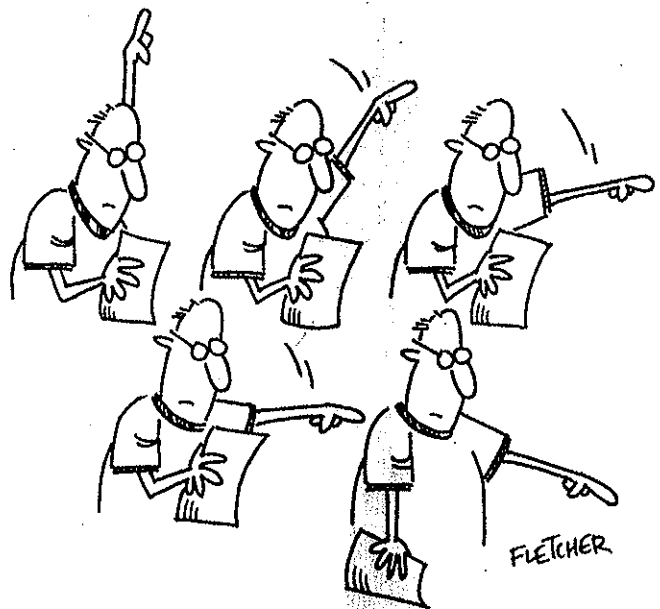
3. Which will be more likely to encourage positive

change in this person's life: continuing to serve or stepping away? One person told a pastor, "I'm not sure I believe this stuff is wrong." It turned out he was in a crisis of faith. He had grown up in the church, but now, in his early adulthood, was asking if he really believed. His service in the church was the only thing keeping him connected; he came only when scheduled to serve. So the pastor asked him to (a) come to church at least one time per month when not serving, and (b) meet with a mature church member to process his questions about the faith, and (c) work toward signing the policy. He agreed, and this approach is keeping him in church, in service, and growing in faith.

If, as part of their pastoral-care plan, we do ask someone to step down, we do that in a way that brings no shame. The volunteer removes himself by simply saying, "I need to step down for a while. I'm going to take a break" or "I need to focus on things in my life." Since at any particular time, several volunteers are just taking a break, doing so doesn't mark someone with a scarlet letter. Nobody knows which people are simply resting and which are being restored.

To be honest, I've been surprised by how well the moral-lifestyle policy has been received. People have told us, "This is really important," or "I'm glad we're taking the time and facing the awkwardness to do it." And the comment people have made over and over is, "I've needed an opportunity to talk, and this gave it to me."

It turns out, as Stewart, our senior pastor, puts it, "Church discipline is a process that makes people feel you're bringing them in closer, not pushing them away." <sup>(L)</sup>



It's Saturday night and Pastor Ted is rehearsing his dramatic, "from the universal, to the personal" transition gesture.

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