Draw the Line
Relational Boundaries for Safe Youth Ministry

FROM THE EDITORS AND ADVISORS OF
CHURCH LAW & TAX

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Introduction

When I started doing research for this book, my stomach was in knots. I began my process by Googling "youth pastor in jail sexual abuse 2013," expecting to find a few news stories. Within two days, I had over 30 individual cases, and I'd barely scratched the surface of the abuse allegations that took place last year. My heart broke for these students, for these pastors, and for these church bodies.

Youth ministry is important to me; it was a safe space for me in junior high and high school, and as a young adult post-college, I was a youth leader. I see youth ministry as a vital space for transformation, safety, and teaching teenagers how to live in Christian community and develop stronger relationships with God. (It's also a place for having innocent fun.)

But when abuse creeps in, that innocence is destroyed. Telling families, let alone young students, that the man or woman who led their ministry for years turned out to be a sexual abuser, a predator, or a liar, is crushing. As Millennials seem to be walking away from their faith in droves, I have to ask myself if constant allegations of two-faced pastors sleeping with students or congregation members has anything to do with it. How can teenagers trust in God when everything they were taught about him was taught by a man who is no longer allowed on the church premises? How can the world trust the church when 13.6 percent of all church court cases take place because of the sexual abuse of minors?

It's uncomfortable to think about. If you're reading this as a youth pastor, I know your desire is to protect your students. But you're fallible. And so are your leaders. The only way you'll be able to ensure that your ministry is a safe place is through boundaries and a strong, no-shame reporting structure. You won't go to jail for telling your supervisor that you're struggling with feeling attracted to one of your students. That honesty will open up doors to prevent anything from happening. It may preserve your career, and it might save your ministry from heartbreak. But the most dangerous thing you can do in the situation of student attraction is to not recognize it for what it is:

the greatest threat to your future life you may ever experience. Where there is no accountability, there is no safety. Even with all the accountability rules and procedures, no one can assure that you or one of your volunteer leaders will not victimize one of your youth group members. However, the rules and procedures discussed in this e-book will reduce the odds and save many of them from becoming victims.

This book is devoted to screening, boundaries, strong policies, and the stories of those who have walked through youth ministry scandals and come out on the other side. We've talked to lawyers, youth pastors, senior pastors, psychologists, ex-students, and safety experts. Each of their perspectives brings forth a unique, important word for your church. Apply these lessons and you will reduce the risk for the church, its youth, and its staff.

May God richly bless your faithfulness in protecting his children.

Ashley Moore
Assistant Editor, Church Law and Tax

CHAPTER ONE

Defeating "Mayberry Syndrome"

Advancing the culture of protection in your church.

BY BRAD NEESE

> *"I find so many churches I talk to around the country that haven't made that decision that they're a church and a corporation. They don't understand the exposures that they have and that their ministry can get obliterated with one bad claim, one accusation of sexual abuse. They think they know everybody, and it's just scary."*
>
> Brian McAuliffe, Willow Creek CFO (Illinois)

In the early 1960s, America was introduced to the town of Mayberry on the *Andy Griffith Show*, and this fictional community encapsulated idyllic small town life and rural simplicity. Everybody trusts everybody else. Aunt Bee keeps house and sings in the town choir; Sheriff Andy Taylor and Deputy Barney Fife maintain a small but friendly police presence; and

Opie Taylor takes himself on adventures, walking around his town as a child without fear. Otis, the town drunk, is handed the keys to the jail cell each night and puts himself to sleep. Of course, Mayberry never really existed; it represented what everyone wanted to believe about their town and their church.

Life was good in this fictional town of 5,360. But what if it were a real town? And what if it grew to be a town of 50,000, and nothing changed?

Enter Mayberry Syndrome: the belief that nothing will go wrong in your church because "everybody knows everybody."

I was first introduced to Mayberry Syndrome at our church a little over eight years ago. In the course of four decades, we had grown into the category of a "large church" with diverse ministries, a healthy budget, expanded facilities, and multiple staff. But our church of 600 was operating like a church of 80—especially in the area of safety. We didn't do background checks on volunteers. We let kids go to the bathrooms by themselves. We didn't know how to report child abuse. We let anyone pick up children from classes. We didn't provide training for volunteers. We had no idea what to do in an emergency. We had no protocol for reporting.

We were showing all the telltale signs of Mayberry Syndrome.

As I interacted with other church leaders, it didn't take me long to realize that small-, medium-, and large-sized churches across the country were infected to some extent with Mayberry Syndrome. It stems from a small-church way of thinking: the "everybody knows everybody" mindset. Everyone trusts everyone else because they attend the same church.

In her article "It Can't Happen Here," Marian V. Liautaud writes on this phenomenon, saying:

> [The] "it-can't-happen-here" mindset, especially among smaller churches, may lead some to overlook—or even resist—implementing a child sexual abuse prevention program. . . . The main reason: "All of us know each other, so nothing bad would happen at our church."
>
> This mindset prevailed in one survey's anecdotal responses, especially among respondents who said they belonged to a "small" church. Child safety experts say assumptions like this are not surprising, but they do underscore the need for education among church leaders.

Mayberry Syndrome can exist in any church, no matter how small or how large, no matter what denomination. When this is prevalent in the area of safety, Mayberry Syndrome may actually become fatal. It can disrupt an active, thriving church in an instant, sending the congregation and its leaders into years of frustrating recovery and possible organizational death.

Diagnosis

There is a simple way to diagnose the presence of Mayberry Syndrome in your church. By honestly reflecting on the following statements about safety, you can take the first steps in identifying the reality and intensity of small-church thinking in a large-church setting. These statements only represent the tip of the iceberg of managing this risk, but they're a good place to start.

We have an official process of screening volunteers who work with children/minors.	*Yes*	*No*
We have an effective way to release children to designated people after services.	*Yes*	*No*
We have written procedures for volunteers who work with children/minors.	*Yes*	*No*
We have an efficient way to notify parents in the case of an emergency.	*Yes*	*No*
We have a method to track a child's allergies.	*Yes*	*No*
We require CPR and/or first-aid training for volunteers.	*Yes*	*No*
We provide regular training for volunteers who work with children/minors.	*Yes*	*No*
We equip our volunteers to spot instances of child abuse.	*Yes*	*No*
We have bathroom facilities solely for children/minors.	*Yes*	*No*

If you answered no to any of the above statements, your church has Mayberry Syndrome.

The syndrome may seem dormant, but it is never benign, and for many churches it is running rampant without leaders even knowing it. You are putting the well-being of children and minors at risk. You are putting the church's assets at risk. You are putting your church's reputation at risk. Ultimately, you are putting the reputation and name of Christ at risk.

Prescription

For my [Brad's] church, Mayberry Syndrome was diagnosed because of the perspective of those coming from *outside* the church. These people happened

to be hired staff from a variety of backgrounds. They immediately recognized and began to address the safety issues we were facing.

As we attempted to properly treat our church, we discovered that five key elements needed to be prescribed (in order of importance):

1. **Find a champion of the process.** If you do not have someone (or a bunch of someones) who is willing to champion the safety cause, your attempts at addressing the syndrome will ultimately fail. Unfortunately, many church leaders will not sense the need for safety, especially if they have been at the church for a prolonged period of time, so you need a bulldog that won't let go of the bone until the mission is accomplished.

2. **Have a clear process.** If you do not have crystal clear steps about how to address Mayberry Syndrome (i.e., how volunteers will be screened or allergies made known, what training procedures are needed, and so on), then you will revert back to your previous habits.

3. **Create a structure to support the process.** You must have the right people in the right places in order for the process to succeed. From data entry to talking with volunteers to dealing with the "red tape," a well-planned structure designed to support and sustain the process is imperative.

4. **Consistently apply the process.** This is perhaps the greatest potential pitfall when combating Mayberry Syndrome. If you make exceptions to the process, you will compromise the integrity you worked so hard to put into place. No one is "grandfathered in" or excluded because of their age, name, or number of years served. **Apply the process to *everyone.***

5. **Regularly evaluate.** Intentionally taking time to revisit the processes and policies allows for growth and even more clarity. Doing so can refine the past and prepare your church for the future.

Treatment

Few people like medicine. Why? Because it usually tastes bad and takes time to work. So it is with treating Mayberry Syndrome. Trying to address every issue at once will actually throw your church into shock. The treatment will be unsustainable, unmanageable, and even harder to recover from.

Treating Mayberry Syndrome is difficult because you are addressing a systemic issue. You have to change the established culture of your church. As we began shifting the thinking and actions of people, we took all of the appropriate steps: trying to "build the need," informing volunteers of the future change, allowing time for discussion, answering questions, and giving a margin for processing. But we found that the success of addressing Mayberry Syndrome consists of two words: **relational leadership**.

The syndrome was easily addressed because we didn't have leaders who relied on positional leadership. We had leaders who personally invested in the lives of volunteers, and it was this relational connection that allowed us to successfully maneuver through a tremendous amount of change.

Results

We knew that our progress in addressing Mayberry Syndrome depended on taking small "baby steps," so we started by mandating that a background check be performed on every volunteer in a ministry with minors. After that, the next step involved requiring volunteers to present two reference letters. Eventually, a child protection policy handbook like *Reducing the Risk* was compiled and distributed as a basic component of our volunteer packet. A check-in/check-out system was initiated, complete with paging notification. A toddler bathroom designated for small children was constructed.

The key is to pick a path and *start moving*.

Is our church totally free from Mayberry Syndrome? No. There are still safety concerns we need to address. We need to develop a comprehensive evacuation plan, think about building security, and have specific discussions about various family situations we are encountering. At the core, Mayberry Syndrome is not a practical issue but a *theological* issue. **If people are made in God's image and likeness, then we need to treat them accordingly, which means we seek to protect and serve children, volunteers, and families. Safety, then, is simply the practical outcome of an essential theological truth.**

CHAPTER TWO

Beyond Trust

One senior pastor reflects on what he would have done differently over 10 years ago to prevent the sexual molestation of his daughter by a co-pastor, as told to Church Law and Tax.

It's been over a year now since our associate pastor, Tim,* resigned after 11 years with us. We were sad to see him go. The January following his exit, we had a girl come forward who confessed that Tim had been sexually molesting her since she was 13. He started grooming her in her pre-teens. This relationship continued for several years.

I'm telling our story because I'd really like to help. This is not something they taught us in seminary when I was there. You see, the victim was my own daughter.

Two years prior to this coming out, my daughter, who was in high school at that time, started having tremendous emotional problems, and we could not for the life of us figure out what was going on. She was dying in a pile. We made arrangements for her to get some Christian counseling.

She started counseling. But she'd been pressured by my associate to never, ever reveal his name. He threatened her by saying what would happen to me as the pastor, and what would happen to the ministry of the church. He was very good at leveraging her silence. Because she was in counseling, she basically told the counselor, "I will never tell you." But the counselor figured out it was abuse. It took her two years, but then finally the counselor convinced her to cut off all contact and relationship with Tim.

We didn't know anything at this point. But I appreciated that the Christian counselor was encouraging her to cut things off with whomever it was, and then they could work from there about feelings. Two years later, she was finally at a point after cutting off this relationship to choke out who it was. So the counselor had me come in with my son, and my daughter told her story to us. We were obviously shocked and crushed. But then I realized that I'm under a mandate to report him.

I made plans to report him, but he'd left our church a couple months before to be involved in a different ministry in another state. I found out later that it was because my daughter had demanded he step down from ministry. That was the real reason he left, rather than the reason he told us and the church.

I'm telling our story because I'd really like to help. This is not something they taught us in seminary when I was there. You see, the victim was my own daughter.

When it came out, I decided the first thing I needed to do was call him, with an elder present, to confront him. And I did. And he did confess to doing it. So I said, "I'm under mandate to turn you in because she was a minor when you were doing this." So I did. And then the police started an investigation.

We were also concerned about the church, obviously. We had a meeting, a congregational meeting, where I had Tim send me a note of confession and apology, which I read at the meeting. Then we took steps to provide counseling and healing for our church. And for other parents who may have been concerned about their own children, we had to take measures to open the investigation to make sure no one else was involved. It was a long process.

Everything was really hanging in the balance. We're not a large church, and I really feared that this was going to be devastating, an absolute nuclear bomb.

The Problem with "Trust"

We were all devastated and crushed. It's really hard to explain, because Tim was one of my best friends. He did an extraordinary job in ministry. He was in charge of our youth and he filled the pulpit for me.

We first met when I was pastoring a different church. I actually happened to fill the pulpit in Tim's church where he was serving as a youth pastor. I really liked what he was doing with the youth. I was impressed with his ministry and his family. A couple years later I came to this area and we were looking for a youth pastor. And I thought to myself that I really wanted someone like Tim.

He seemed to have a really well-functioning youth group. But I didn't call him or anything because I didn't want to steal him from another church.

But as we were interviewing people, we wanted someone like that. Well, as it turns out, we had a posting at the college where Tim went to school. And Tim saw the posting and ended up calling me, saying, "If the position's still open, I'd like to apply for it."

And I said, "Absolutely. Send me your stuff."

We had these accountability times with our elders, where they would ask pointed questions, but he would just lie through them. Each of the staff was rotationally paired with an elder in the church. They met once a month. Every month Tim and I would rotate with the other elders. We had a list of questions we would ask each other—about sexual purity; a whole list of things. At the very end, the very last question was, "Have you lied to me about any of these things?" We had that in place.

We had safeguards in place, we had accountability structures in place, and he literally just circumvented everything we had in place. He just lied. He developed these secret little pathways. He fooled his wife, his kids. The people closest to him had absolutely no clue. He did things off-site, he made sure he did his leveraging of fear in the victim, and boy, I mean, she was ready to die with this secret. I just think he thought, *This is never going to be a problem.* He was very, very careful and he took his time. It wasn't any kind of rash thing.

After this went down, everybody was in a state of shock. I still have a hard time believing it. It took me a while. I had one picture in my brain of this guy and reality was telling me something different. I could not put those two pictures together. It just didn't make any sense. How it could happen still baffles us . . . and honestly I don't know if we could have done anything differently. I've gone through this over and over in my head.

The Importance of Screening

We do background checks now. It's a no-brainer. But with Tim, I don't think we did. I don't think this is right, but there was an assumption on our part that he was cleared by this other ministry he was involved in. And the references that he had from the other ministry sang his praises. We assumed they did their due diligence. I'd actually observed him in ministry and I didn't think that there would be any problem whatsoever. In fact, even now, prior to this incident in Tim's life, his background check would've come up clean. The police did their go-round with him, and there was nothing in his background. He seemed to be a pro at what he was doing, but this was his first arrest.

Because I kind of knew Tim already, and it wasn't just a cold application, and I knew he had a successful, well-spoken-of ministry previously, I was more

willing to let him jump right in. And he was immediately received and established himself in ministry. It was getting to the point where, instead of calling me, people started calling Tim for counseling. That's how much he was respected.

He was a great guy. Down to earth. Humble. You could tell he had a servant's heart. And so, that's how we knew each other. It's not like we were good friends before, we had met in a ministry environment. I observed his ministry before, and boy, I was impressed.

The thing I still wonder about is this: At the time Tim called me, he saw my posting, he had left that youth ministry and had been working in a sporting goods store for about a year. And he wanted to return to the ministry. Ever since this broke, I've been wondering why he left that youth ministry. I wouldn't doubt that something happened there, given what he did here.

He actually told my daughter once, "One day you're going to hate me for this." That leads me to believe he's done this before perhaps, even though no one has ever come forward. It could be a similar situation. If there's another victim, she's probably ready to go to the grave with it. It raises questions in my mind. Looking back, I probably should have pursued that. I should have asked more probing questions.

We had standards in place for youth leaders and directors, which served us well. But there is not much you can do when they choose to violate them.

It's changed my paradigm in terms of screening people. I think I was under an old school—maybe it's old school—of thought. Just trusting. His testimony was great. His ministry was fantastic. He's a brother in the Lord. What's not to trust? I just assumed it. I don't think I can ever do that again.

As I look back, I don't think there is anything we could have done differently, *per se*. We tried to be as careful as possible. We did the homework we *knew to do*. I don't know what I would have done differently. Especially after someone had been here 10 or 11 years. He had earned our respect and our trust. He was respected in the community as a youth leader. He worked with a local ministry in the high schools. He was on a local, secular youth commission. He was a respected leader on that committee. That's not a big committee. And every single one of those leaders was just as bamboozled as we were. That's what was shocking—that a person could do that. It was just not in the church. It was community-wide.

Future Hiring Practices

What I would do prior to hiring anyone to work in the youth ministry is for the church to develop a really clear set of guidelines that you expect to be upheld. I would present those to the candidate.

Question different scenarios of what that person would do, like, *Taking a kid home alone? What if they're stuck? What would you do?* And I would really go

with that. You can learn a lot when you ask about situational standards. It's what we did with [our new youth pastor]. We could really feel that he was resonating with where we were in terms of the kids' safety and responsibility and accountability on his part. So I would want to have that in place, and I would want to know what his response was to those kinds of standards.

We would also present scenarios from those standards, like, "Suppose a young girl wants to confide in you alone? What are you going to do?" That's the first thing I would do. Then I would really work hard at trying to observe him in different ministry situations. I wouldn't be in a hurry, in other words. Go slow. Take your time.

Now, I don't think you can take too many precautions. I do think precautions are necessary.

The biggest thing we enforce now, that we didn't enforce then, is a zero-tolerance policy of any youth worker alone with a minor for any period of time.

The biggest thing we enforce now, that we didn't enforce then, is a zero-tolerance policy of any youth worker alone with a minor for any period of time. And everyone knows, across the board, kids on through, that that is never to be violated. We're not going to let this happen again.

***Names and some details have been changed to protect the privacy of the people involved in this recent case.**

This pastor's story was shared exclusively with Church Law and Tax. His experience was shared with us in hopes of preventing future abuse in a church setting. Although it's the most basic, the "never-alone" rule is one that should never be violated. If you notice signs of abuse, behavior, or dramatic mood change in a student, don't hesitate to take necessary steps to ensure their safety. Check out "What Youth Pastors Should Know about Child Abuse Reporting" for more information.

CHAPTER THREE

Screening Resources and First Steps

Sadly, stories like the pastor's in Chapter Two are not uncommon. The broken trust and the broken hearts that emerge from sexual abuse are devastating, but screening and background checks can help.

This piece covers step-by-step screening and background checks your church needs to implement.

BY JAMES F. COBBLE, JR.

Screening Workers

Over the past 10 years, approximately 3,500 churches per year have responded to allegations of sexual misconduct in church programs involving children or youth.

Thousands of churches have taken steps to reduce this problem. Yet much more still needs to be done. Screening workers is essential to protecting children from sexual predators. Churches are making progress in screening paid employees, but screening volunteer workers remains problematic.

Screening workers is vital for two reasons: First, churches can be found liable for the negligent selection of a volunteer just as they can for a paid employee. Second, our research indicates that volunteer workers are just as likely to be the perpetrators of abuse as are paid staff members.

The main goal of a church screening program is to ward off individuals who have an intent or history of abusing children. A church that establishes a screening program sends a message. Predators do not want to be in such a church.

Now is the time to review your church's screening process and childcare supervision policies.

Two Kinds of Molesters

Time magazine estimates the prevalence of adults who are sexually interested in children (pedophilia) at 4 percent of the population. That does not include the percentage interested in teenagers (ephebophilia), which psychiatrists don't classify as an illness. The point is that the number of adults interested in sexual activity with minors is higher than one would imagine.

The two general profiles of child molesters are important for church leaders to understand: preferential molesters and situational molesters.

Preferential molesters have a preference for children, often of a particular age and gender. While these individuals are few in number, a single perpetrator can molest hundreds of children. Preferential molesters pose a unique and serious danger to churches. Such an individual may appear as the ideal worker for children. They enjoy being with children and will spend lots of time socializing with them. Since most churches find it hard to recruit adults to work with children, finding someone who enjoys being with children and who is willing to invest significant time in church programs may be viewed as a blessing. Thus, the church's guard may be down.

Since most churches find it hard to recruit adults to work with children, finding someone who enjoys being with children and who is willing to invest significant time in church programs may be viewed as a blessing. Thus, the church's guard may be down.

The best way to ward off preferential molesters is to develop an environment that puts the molester at risk rather than the children. The process begins with a thorough screening program for both paid and volunteer workers and some healthy skepticism among the leaders responsible for recruiting and training workers.

Situational molesters exist in greater number than preferential molesters, but they have fewer victims. These individuals engage in misconduct when

a situation develops or exists that makes abuse possible. Screening may ward off some situational molesters. More important are policies that provide supervision of workers and ensure multiple workers in classrooms.

From a legal perspective, a church must engage in the same duty of care in the selection of volunteers who work with children and youth as it does in the selection of paid staff members. In both cases, the selection process should reflect the standard of reasonable care. Here are some suggestions to help with this process.

Raise the Threshold

Start by establishing requirements that must be met before an individual can serve in a position working with children or youth. For volunteers, attention should be given to two primary factors: (1) the level of involvement the person has in the church and (2) how long the person has been a part of the congregation.

1. **Membership or equivalent.** This requirement focuses on the individual's commitment to and involvement in the congregation.

2. **The six-month rule.** Start by establishing a length of time the person must be a member of the church, such as six months, before he or she can volunteer to work with children or youth. The purpose of this rule is to prevent the molester from gaining quick access to potential victims. A predator will not want to stick around a church for an extended period of time waiting to get access to children, especially when he or she can go elsewhere and have almost immediate access.

Volunteers who work with children should be involved in the church and should be able to list two other church members who can serve as informed references concerning their involvement. This is especially important in large congregations where staff members may not know every member well and yet depend on large numbers of recruited volunteers to assist with church programs.

It is not enough for a person to have been a member for six months. He or she should also be active enough in the life of the church that other members can provide a reference.

Implement Formal Screening

The screening process for volunteers is similar to that for paid employees. It should include the use of a written application, reference checks, a personal

interview, and in some cases, criminal record checks. Make sure all information is maintained as confidential. Forms for these applications and interviews should be developed and approved by the congregation and reviewed by the church's attorney.

1. Use a written application form

While using a written application form may sound obvious, our data indicates that many churches still do not use one. Make sure the application you use contains a release form. In many states, a signed release form authorizes you to collect information from references and enables the references to share legitimate concerns about a former worker without fear of legal liability.

2. Conduct reference checks

Once the written application is complete, the church should conduct reference checks. Normally, for prospective job applicants, the references should include former employers as well as personal and professional references. As noted above, volunteers should list at least two church members for personal references and then provide any institutional references—meaning institutions where these individuals previously interacted with children or youth. All references should be contacted for input concerning the volunteer's qualifications for working with children or youth. Often this is done either in person or over the phone. Document in writing all efforts in collecting the reference and the information you receive. Once you are finished, keep all forms and notes with the application.

3. Conduct a personal interview

Once reference checks are complete, the church should conduct a personal interview. Use the interview as a time to fully explore why the volunteer wants to work with children or youth. You can also use this time to provide training to the volunteer. It's a good time to cover church policies and procedures regarding the supervision of children.

4. Conduct a criminal record check

The 2012 Freeh report issued after the Jerry Sandusky child abuse scandal at Penn State University defines a "standard" background check as a criminal history check, a sex and violent offender registry check, plus the following additional components for specific positions based on job-related need: educational verification (required for all academic positions); motor vehicle record (required for positions where it can be regularly anticipated that a responsibility of the position will be to drive a church-owned vehicle); credit history check (conducted only for sensitive/critical positions with extensive authority to commit financial resources of the church); and

employment verifications and license verification as needed, based on job requirements. The report also recommends background checks be repeated every five years.

Some churches conduct criminal records checks on all volunteers as well. Minimally, the church should request a criminal record check for volunteers who have frequent and unsupervised access to children or youth. The phrase "unsupervised access to children" appears in both state and federal legislation to identify individuals requiring a higher level of screening and accountability. Unfortunately, the phrase is vague, and its exact application to specific situations within a church is not always clear. The committee report that accompanied the federal National Child Protection Act contains the following comment that provides some clarification:

> [Not] all occupations and volunteer positions . . . merit the time and expense of criminal history records checks. There are other means available to protect children from abuse, including the checking of prior employment history and character references and proper training and supervision of employees and volunteers.

Ask the Tough Questions

What kinds of criminal convictions disqualify an individual from working with youth or children in the church? A criminal conviction for a sexual offense involving a minor would certainly disqualify an applicant. In the case of pedophilic behavior, such a conviction should disqualify an individual no matter how long ago it occurred (because of the virtual impossibility that such a condition can be "cured").

Other automatic disqualifiers would include incest, rape, assaults involving minors, murder, kidnapping, child pornography, sodomy, and the physical abuse of a minor. Other crimes strongly indicate that a person should not be considered for work with minors in a church.

Some crimes would not be automatic disqualifiers because they would not necessarily suggest a risk of child abuse or molestation. Learn more about how to identify disqualifying crimes in Richard Hammar's *Pastor, Church & Law, Volume Four*.

Churches should interview all applicants for children's or youth work prior to using them in any such program or activity. When conducting an interview, use a standardized and written list of questions.

It is also important for the church to identify a person who will conduct these interviews and to train this person to do the interviewing.

Following the interview, there should be written notations on the interview form identifying the person who conducted the interview, the applicant

who was interviewed, the date of the interview, and a summary of the applicant's responses to the questions.

All information, whether collected on a form or during an interview, should be kept strictly confidential.

Legal and Moral Obligations

At a minimum, when screening either paid employees or volunteer workers, a church should (1) use a written application; (2) do reference checks; (3) conduct criminal records checks, including a sex offender registry search of all 50 states (NSOPW.gov); (4) interview the volunteer; and (5) provide training. To our knowledge, no church that has done these things has been found liable of negligent selection.

The recent attention given to the problem of child sexual abuse in the church establishes an important point. American society and church members themselves will not excuse churches that do not protect their children. The safety of children outweighs any other consideration, and no jury will tolerate any excuse, especially one that merely protests that screening is inconvenient.

For further screening and background check information, check out our resources below:

- *Essentials for Screening Youth Workers*
- *Screening & Selecting Children's Workers*
- *Reducing the Risk*
- *Pastor, Church & Law, Volume Four:* Liability & Church and State Issues (Chapter 10)

CHAPTER FOUR

What Youth Pastors Can Learn from Therapeutic Boundaries

Interview with Lauren Widman, M.A., Doctoral Candidate in Clinical Psychology

BY ASHLEY MOORE

> *"An overt sexual act is often the culmination of a process occurring over a period of time, starting with vague, uneasy feelings of excitement, but progressing in tidy, rationalized steps toward sexual contact."*
>
> Ethics in Psychology and the Mental Health Professions (Third Edition)

In the psychology field, therapists are encouraged to recognize feelings of attraction toward their clients, and deal with them in a professional manner. Unfortunately, this same recognition is enshrouded in shame in most church settings. This leads to youth

pastors feeling isolated, battling feelings they know they shouldn't have, afraid to tell anyone for fear of losing their jobs. Psychology Doctorate student Lauren Widman speaks up about what the field of mental health and therapy is doing right—and what the church could learn from a little more self-awareness.

Why do you think youth pastors and therapists both struggle with the possibility of inappropriate attraction to the students or clients they work with?

Youth pastors and therapists both tend to be in a position of power and authority over people who are coming to them for help. And often, youth pastors are younger individuals, working with students who are not that far from their own age. This can be dangerous if boundaries aren't established.

Should youth pastors be embarrassed about feelings of attraction?

In the field of training clinicians, there is a portrayal of the *inevitability* of possible attraction to a client. And there's a real lack of shame surrounding the possibility of having a physical attraction to a client. Because of the nature of our work, you engage with people on a very emotionally intimate level that can foster feelings of attraction to clients. The key is to educate someone on how they can be self-aware and maneuver those relationships for the protection of the client and their self-esteem.

Boundaries need to address the power differential. In a position of power, you have to be responsible for the possible exploitation of a youth or a client.

How can youth pastors be honest with themselves about feelings of attraction?

Part of our training is in self-awareness. Future mental health clinicians are constantly developing self-awareness and introspection. Knowing what our own baggage is and what our tendencies are can be preventive in the abuse or exploitation of clients—but it also promotes healthy boundaries.

Beyond self-awareness, there is also encouragement to really be aware of what is going on between you and the client. Feelings are normal—attraction between two people is normal. And even more so, clients come in and often feel an attraction toward the therapist. So those things need to be resolved in a way that really preserves the professional boundaries of the therapeutic relationship and protects the therapy process and treatment goals but also helps bolster the self-esteem of the client so that you're not shaming them for feelings of attraction.

In a youth ministry setting, the relational awareness absolutely falls on the youth leaders and pastors. Teenagers aren't fully developed emotionally

or cognitively; they don't have the self-awareness they need to always make good decisions.

In the field of psychology, if there is a feeling of attraction, no matter how small, you don't ignore it. You seek consultation, talk to someone you trust and respect who can give you an objective reflection. They really fight the culture of shame that is still very present in the church.

What are some signs of possible attraction?

Some signs that might alert you that you have a higher potential of risk of acting on attraction to someone who is in your pastoral care are as follows:

1. Thinking about your student outside of ministry time.
2. If you're grooming more or wearing a different outfit because you maybe want them to think you are special. You're trying to impress them with your clothing.
3. Looking forward to times with particular students more than other students.
4. Hoping that you see your student out in the public, at the local grocery store, and so on. Hoping you'll have an excuse to engage with him or her more personally.
5. Having trouble concentrating in small group or ministry time because you're thinking about having contact with them outside of this setting.
6. Trying to elicit more information out of curiosity rather than because it pertains to ministry efforts or spiritual development.
7. Flirting.

(See more from Koocher &Keith-Spiegel (2008), *Ethics in Psychology and the Mental Health Professions*.)

If you do have an attraction to a client, don't ignore it. Seek consultation, talk to a supervisor. And most people do that and never act on the physical or sexual attraction to a client.

In therapy, if you speak to your supervisor about feeling attracted to a client, what happens?

Well, all of that self-awareness and self-analysis is brought into supervision. One of the greatest risks in instances of abuse in a therapeutic relationship or in a ministry relationship is when someone is very isolated professionally—they don't have supervisors, pastors, or colleagues they can trust and talk to. This puts them in a place where they can't seek supervision and have someone hold them accountable for their actions.

The same goes for burnout. If a pastor or a mental health professional has no one to go to, and they have high demand roles and are being depleted, that's

when it gets risky. That's when they might to start leaning on the people they're working with in a counseling setting to get some sort of emotional closeness. The same goes for youth pastors and leaders.

Catching these signs that can be harmless is so necessary—early awareness is the best thing. Saying that you've been thinking about your student outside of ministry times once or twice—that needs to be then brought to your supervisor. And it might turn out to be nothing. It might be something where you're just more worried about their safety or a situation they're facing. So it could be totally harmless. But you want to process that in supervision. In the mental health field, the nature of supervision is to process these relationships *under* therapeutic supervision, which is something I don't think pastors probably have. They need to have people they can speak to, safely, about the relationships they're working in every single day.

In the mental health field, the nature of supervision is to process these relationships under therapeutic supervision, which is something I don't think pastors probably have. They need to have people they can speak to, safely, about the relationships they're working in every single day.

No matter what the feeling is—what if you're feeling angry about your student? What if you don't like your student? That should be brought into supervision. It's okay to have your own stuff that you bring into a relationship.

In pastoral care, it probably seems more okay to tell another pastor or supervisor that you don't like a certain student. That feeling is accepted. But it might feel incredibly awkward to say that you like a student more than you should. There's a real discomfort in the church about some of those feelings, whereas a lot of those feelings are normal—especially if you have a 24-year-old youth pastor hanging out with 17-year-olds. The nature of training in psychology is that there shouldn't be shame placed on feelings. Instead, you should be given an outlet for processing those feelings and then putting up boundaries that are for the best interest of the client or student.

LEGALLY SPEAKING

Interview with Attorney David Middlebrook

If a youth pastor tells a senior pastor that he's feeling overly close to a student, what happens if they confess that they're feeling attracted to a student? Will they get in trouble for speaking out about it?

No, it should be encouraged. There needs to be accountability. You want to create an environment where if something like that happened—you began to feel feelings for someone in the group that was inappropriate—you have to be able to tell someone. They can either get help or do something that will cure the situation before it either becomes inappropriate or has the experience of being inappropriate. If you are called to account for your conduct, you're not innocent until proven guilty—you're guilty until proven innocent.

What's a good reporting structure?

I think there has to be alternative reporting—your supervisor, or somebody else. There could be scenarios, where, if you only have one person to report to, you might be fearful of reporting your concern to that person. So you need to give them alternate ways to get help. From an organizational standpoint, they should be encouraged to get help.

What if it's a volunteer youth leader? Because they're more fluid, should they just step out of ministry?

Yes.

What about for youth pastors?

Well, it's difficult because I don't know what the degree of the problem is with the relationship. In some circumstances, you need to remove yourself from ministry, period. But in other situations, it should be handled differently. There

needs to be a culture where everyone knows they have a route to reach out for help. It should be, "If there's an issue that arises, here's how you reach out for help. Here's your primary, and if that doesn't work, here's your secondary. But we have an open-door policy for anyone who has an issue that relates to the safety and welfare of children."

What is the next step for pastors in this situation?

In youth ministry, you would need to talk about your feelings toward your student with either your supervisor or another pastor. And then you would, in that reporting structure, process through what you need to do next.

If these feelings or signs aren't caught early, this can mean termination of a mentorship.

Where do you draw the line? When does a pastor or volunteer need to be removed from ministry?

Part of the meeting process with your supervisor or reporting pastor is to decide what should happen next. In therapy, it's part of the consultation process. You decide together how strong these feelings are. Does it have to do with an actual sexual feeling of attraction? Or does it have to do with the ministry process? Are you feeling overly close with a student because you've been working with them really intensely?

Those questions need to be taken into account. If you've already seen this student outside of a ministry setting, that's a sign that you've started to go too far. Have you been making excess contact with that student? Then you need to remove yourself, hopefully in a temporary manner, and the church needs to work with you to figure out if these are issues that need to be dealt with so you can return to ministry or if you need to step away from ministry on a more permanent level.

When it starts to become about the pastor and not about the student, that's when a problem develops.

That's when the supervisor should say, "It's not in the students' best interests for you to continue to pastor them, because you've now started to serve your own needs and wants. You've reached out to a student in ways that are inappropriate and boundary-crossing."

When it starts to become about the pastor and not about the student, that's when a problem develops.

But in really good cases, it may mean that those feelings are caught early, talked about in supervision, and then boundaries are specifically set in place and accountability is held so that the pastor continues a good ministry relationship.

In that case, do there need to be follow-ups?

Absolutely. So then you should have continued surveillance of that relationship. Any time you meet with that student, notes should be taken. The supervisor should be reading those notes and checking up on the youth pastor for the next couple of weeks or months, until that situation is resolved or until a plan of action is determined.

What is the biggest factor that increases the risk of pastor-student attraction?

Professional isolation. It is crucial for pastors to be self-aware and have personal time and attention given to their health, well-being, and spiritual health.

In ministry, there's a rule that you should only meet with someone for eight weeks. Do you think that's a good rule—to limit your time as a lay counselor?

It would be interesting to look up the amount of time someone has met individually, talking about emotional processing or something really intimate, and correlate that with rates of abuse. Because you put someone in a position of power, a multi-relationship situation, and an extended relationship—lines get blurred to a point that might not be healthy anymore. But I really value the role of pastoral ministry. So I would ask the question, *Why is a pastor continuing a one-on-one relationship with a person for that long? What's the motive behind it? And does the pastor have supervision on that relationship based on the needs of the student? Is there a chain of command?*

If pastors are going to do pastoral counseling, even mentoring with students, they need to have some support about their own intimacy and their relationships, their own personal health—counselors have that. Pastoral work is emotionally draining, and if they don't have the support, accountability, and safe space to have long-term relationships with students, then they need to proceed extremely carefully.

TRANSFERENCE AND INFATUATION: A PRINCIPLE TO KEEP IN MIND

By Richard Hammar (for more on this issue, check out Pastor, Church & Law)

Many courts have recognized the psychological principle of "transference." To illustrate, one court defined transference as "a phenomenon that occurs that is similar to a state of dependency in which the client begins to project the roles and relationships and the images and experiences that they have had with other people previously in their life, especially other significant people such as mother, father, brothers, sisters, early teachers and adult models, upon the therapist."

Another court defined transference as "a process whereby a patient undergoing psychotherapy for a mental or emotional disturbance (particularly a female patient being treated by a male psychotherapist) develops such overwhelming feelings of warmth, trust, and dependency towards the therapist that she is deprived of the will to resist any sexual overtures he might make."

What are some physical boundaries that need to be put in place?

The nature of counseling relationships in the field of psychology is that physical contact is discouraged. Physical contact, if ever approached, should be approached with extreme caution.

If you are experiencing a strong desire to hug or touch a student—if any touch is too long or drawn out, that's a red flag or an indicator that you're starting to act on those attraction feelings. In therapy, in a way that is still in the best interest of the client, you might need to terminate that relationship.

In ministry, there needs to be transparency with whatever physical boundaries you have in place.

Students love to give hugs. They like to engage physically. But there is a way to not shame a student for wanting to hug you. To say, "Because I'm a pastor, I have to put up these boundaries to make sure that you're safe.

Because this is an emotionally intimate process, one of the boundaries we can set up to make you safe is that we don't hug." And that's going to feel weird because students will come in and talk to you about all of their emotional and spiritual problems, and they'll possibly feel like they're not getting any reciprocation. But it's in their best interest.

So I wonder if pastors can talk about those issues with students, not to shame them for wanting a hug from their youth pastor, who has a very emotionally and spiritually intimate relationship with their students, but in a way that says, "I am working for your best interest. You might think this is kind of funny and weird, but it's not good for us to hug."

What is the main message here for youth pastors?

The main thing is, pastors need to not be so afraid to get out of a relationship for the safety of a client. Granted, I'm in a professional psychotherapy role, so I'm able to say, "You'd work better with another therapist." But I think pastors should have the liberty to say, "I need to step down, or this student would work better in a different small group, or I need to be in a different group." Just something that allows them to move away from that situation. They don't need to lose their jobs; they don't need to step down from teaching. They just need something that will get them out of that one-on-one relationship, even if that means that pastor doesn't go on the next youth retreat. I think churches need to protect the students more. And even more so, they need to give permission to pastors to ask for help.

CHAPTER FIVE

Flirting with Disaster

How to respond when a youth flirts with you.

BY JACK CRABTREE

"It doesn't take a conviction to end a career; it takes an accusation. Because once that is tied to your name, you're done. If there's a whiff of impropriety, you're done. And you don't have to be sitting in a jail cell knowing, Oh, I screwed up. You'll be sitting at home not doing any youth work at all because you didn't guard your boundaries in this area well enough.

"I've watched three of my friends who will never, ever be youth pastors again, not because they necessarily did something wrong. They were in the wrong place at the wrong time and were accused. And they're done. And they're never, ever going to work for a church ever again."

Wes Trevor, Colorado Youth Pastor

Q: I am a volunteer in our junior high ministry. Some of the young women flirt openly with me. I'm really uncomfortable with this, but I don't know how to respond to their advances. What should I do to discourage their behavior without humiliating them?

A: I'm impressed that you (as a man) are seeing your interaction with these young women for what it is. Often it takes a female leader to clue us male leaders into what is happening with young women. What most men perceive as fun and harmless often looks different to the female adult leaders. Listen to them. They usually have good intuition and instincts about how female students see their male leaders.

You should talk to your supervisor about this situation and document what has caused you to ask this question. Talk to the pastor and leaders of your church privately about how you will respond to this situation. Keep them informed about what you are doing to protect yourself and your youth ministry.

Here are three proactive responses to this flirting:

1. **Cut back your time and interaction with these girls.** Focus and stay busy with the boys in your group. Select and prepare a female leader to work with these young women. Inform her of your intentions so she will help keep these girls busy apart from you.

2. **Be very careful and strict regarding your physical contact and verbal interaction with these young women.** Don't encourage their flirting, which is normal at this age. The maturity gap with their male peers, popular media endorsement of eroticized relationships, and the lack of relationship with a consistent loving father in many homes can all lead to the flirting directed at you. You can't change or control any of these forces. But you can focus on building positive relationships that limit physical contact with them—for example, an occasional, neutral, side-to-side hug in a group setting, never in private.

3. **There should never be any private texting, email, or social media communication taking place between you and the young women.** If one of the minors messages you something even remotely "flirty," immediately send a copy of all messages received to your supervisor. Having this additional form of accountability allows the youth worker's supervisor to intervene and to secure the attention of the parents if needed.

4. **Avoid conversations about their physical appearance or sexual topics.** When "sex" enters the conversation, respond

positively and pleasantly that this isn't an appropriate subject for you to discuss with them. You may have to remove yourself from where they are, or you could ask a female leader to join the conversation and respond appropriately to them. Let them know you care about them, but don't meet or travel with them alone.

5. **Follow the guidelines your church has set up regarding appropriate adult-student contact.** If the flirtatious behavior persists, have a forthright discussion with these young women—with an adult female leader present—to explain the reasons you are being so careful with them. Explain that you love them with a Christ-like, fatherly love that requires you to set physical, emotional, and verbal boundaries with them. Your goal is to be their friend and spiritual advisor, helping them to follow Christ for the rest of their lives. That goal is so important to you that it means setting boundaries in your relationship with them. You need to have an appropriate male-female relationship with them during this time of their lives, so they can build mature, lasting friendships in the future.

6. **If you are married,** consider getting your wife involved to show your love as a couple to these young women.

You are wise to be cautious with these relationships. Tragically, many young people have been abused and deeply scarred by youth leaders who allowed romance and sex to be part of their ministry relationships. Don't break the trust with these young women and their families. If you or any of your youth leaders cannot do what is necessary to have appropriate relationships with young people, you should leave the youth ministry and find another place to serve in the church. Keep talking to your senior pastor and other youth leaders about appropriate responses to these young women.

CHAPTER SIX

Seven Practical Boundaries

"We watched a youth pastor at another church who was driving students home, alone. One of his students got pregnant by her boyfriend but blamed it on the youth pastor. His marriage fell apart. He lost his job. He got kicked out of church; all that stuff. And it wasn't until later that she finally confessed that it was the boyfriend that got her pregnant. But in the meantime the guy's life was destroyed, absolutely destroyed. And it's a naïveté and a gullibility that just can't happen anymore. I don't think people understand how often and how frequently it's happening out there."

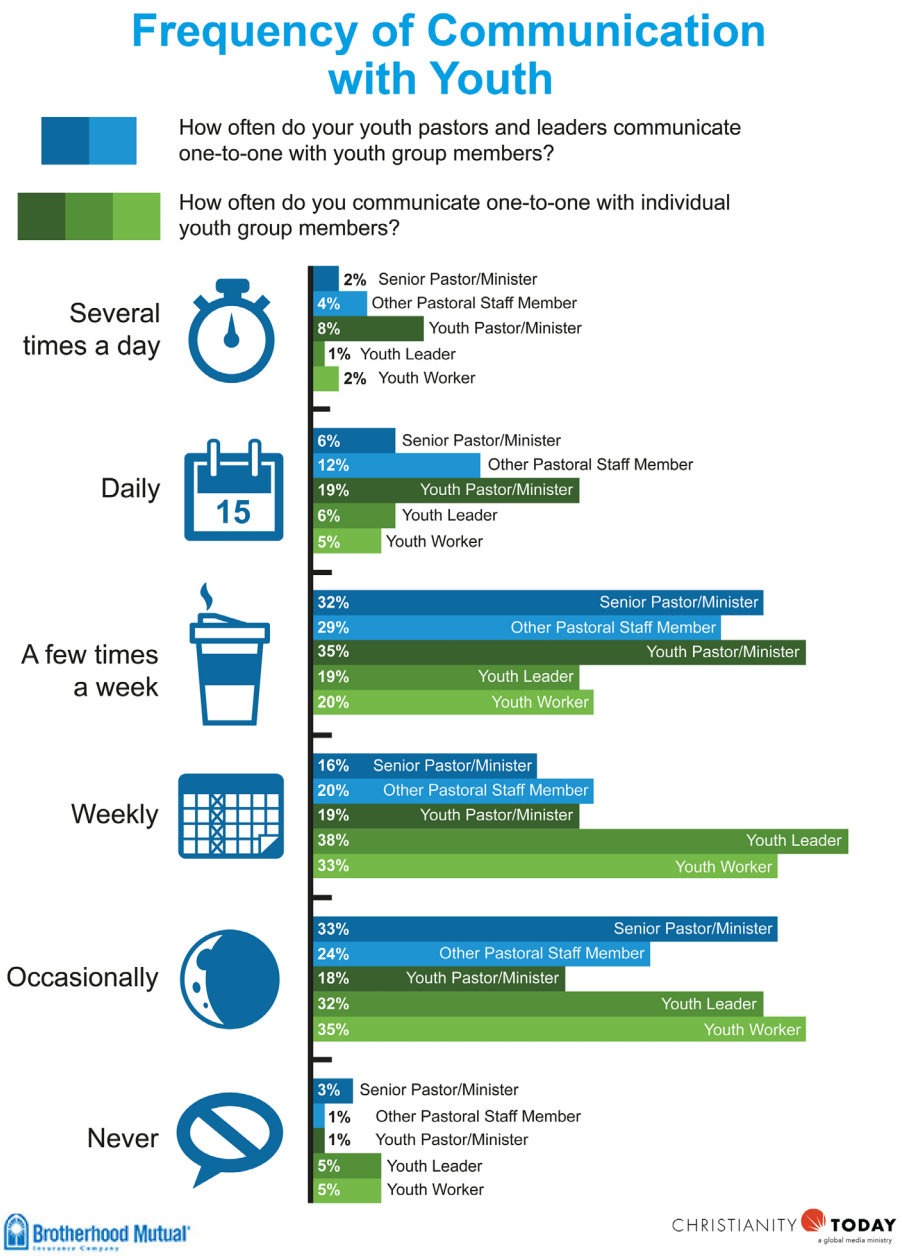
Brad Neese, Michigan Teaching Pastor

Practically Speaking

In the *Youth Ministry in America* survey, the question of how frequently youth pastors communicate with students individually was asked in two ways: how often senior pastors *believe* their youth pastor(s) communicate one-on-one with students and how often youth pastors *actually* communicate with students individually. Senior pastors are more likely to respond that youth pastors communicate with individuals *occasionally* (33 percent) or *a few times a week* (32 percent). However, six in 10 youth

pastors say they communicate with individual group members *a few times a week* or more often.

With the varying degrees of communication between youth pastors and students, as well as the difference in the expectations of senior pastors and youth pastors in the frequency of communication, ministry relational boundaries seem to be lacking. The best boundaries are the ones that remove any temptation or vulnerability in a youth ministry setting—for both the students and the leaders.



Boundaries

Attorney Frank Sommerville lists seven boundaries that will keep you *and* your students safe.

1. The "never alone" rule

Leaders should take care to always meet with students in the presence of a third party. When a youth worker is alone with a teen, he is placing his future in the teen's hands, since most authorities will give the benefit of the doubt to the teen, not the adult leader. Avoid this situation by always having a third party present when meeting with a teen. In a one-on-one mentoring relationship, consider meeting in an open, public place. The same things hold true on social media and via texting. Do not communicate privately in any manner.

An easy place to overlook this rule is in the car, but workers should never be alone with a teen in a car. Even if a student needs a ride, be cautious and responsible, and make sure you are not alone. Remember: with only two witnesses present, the authorities tend to believe the teen, not the adult.

2. The "opposite sex" rule

This may seem obvious, but it is important to state: adult leaders should avoid developing close emotional relationships with teens of the opposite sex. What a leader may view as innocent conversation, a teen may see as flirting. Take precautions by asking other leaders for feedback on your interactions with students. If others question your motives or communication, change your style. This is especially necessary with teens that are vulnerable and need affirmation from the opposite sex.

Students' emotions are basically a roller coaster, and students are apt to develop crushes on members of the opposite sex whom they respect. If a teen develops an emotional bond with a worker, she may become angry when that worker rejects her attention. Sometimes this anger can turn into false accusations, including criminal accusations.

Adult leaders should also exercise extreme caution in dealing with teens of the same sex. If a teen is confused about his sexual identity, he may attempt to develop a close relationship with a worker of the same sex. Again, this relationship is fraught with hazards. While the adult leader may counsel the teen regarding sexuality, it is critical to avoid building unhealthy emotional bonds.

LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE

By Wes Trevor, Colorado Youth Pastor

Ten years ago, the youth pastor at my church had a two-year-long inappropriate relationship with a student. Now, we have to be above board on a lot of that stuff. Beforehand, things were done, for lack of a better term, the old-fashioned way. There was not a lot of technology involved. There was just a lot of alone time between students and adults. But that's left a lot of scars.

We are in the process of establishing a more official training program. I would say that we had a small-church mindset, but because of that situation 10 years ago, that mindset had to10 shift. But it's taken ten years to get to where background checks are normal for working with minors and where training for volunteers was expected. It really comes from a mindset where we don't think as a corporation, we think as a church. We think, *Yeah, we know everyone. So we don't need to go through this.* Or *We have other things that are higher on the priority list.* But in 2008, we finished up a four-year lawsuit as a result of this inappropriate relationship from 10 years ago, and the church realized that we are still a corporation. We've got to cover ourselves better and make sure that we are taking care of our staff and covering our volunteers and trying to prevent any of these types of situations from happening again. So we're in the middle of a very long process of that culture shift to being more proactive in doing the research ahead of time as opposed to reacting after something happens.

3. The "more time" rule

Related to the first two rules, it is important to monitor "off duty" time spent with students. If the amount of time you spend with a student becomes

inordinate, take precautions to avoid awkward situations that could lead to false accusations. If a student frequently seeks out the company of a leader, it might be a sign that an unhealthy relationship is developing. The adult leader should keep track of their time together and discuss the situation with the supervisors and parents of the teen.

A corollary to this rule: If an adult leader is meeting consistently with a student to discuss life issues, those meetings should not go on for more than eight weeks. After eight weeks, the chances that a student will become unhealthily dependent on the leader increase dramatically. If the teen needs further assistance, the worker should refer the student to a professional counselor.

4. The "no confidentiality" rule

Youth leaders should never promise confidentiality to a student. Under most state child abuse laws, youth ministry workers are required to report any circumstance where a child has been, or is in danger of, being harmed emotionally, sexually, or physically. If an authority figure, such as a parent or law enforcement officer, requests information about a teen, the youth leader must fully disclose his or her knowledge. Failure to respond appropriately is not in the best interest of the student and may result in criminal charges against the worker.

For example, if a teen shares with a youth worker that she has been sexually abused, the worker must report this activity to the student's parents and other authorities and possibly to the state's child protective services.

5. The "transparency" rule

Youth leaders need a system of accountability where they can be absolutely transparent about their behavior. Some churches require weekly or monthly statements from all workers stating that they haven't behaved inappropriately toward their teens. Examples of inappropriate behavior include sending or receiving text messages containing prohibited language or meetings that violate the church's policies. At the very least, workers should meet regularly with an accountability partner, another trusted believer who will ask direct questions. The leaders' cell phones should be regularly submitted to the accountability partner to look for warning signs.

6. The "no porn" rule

Youth leaders need to be aware of the reality of pornography in students' lives. Because pornography dehumanizes individuals, teenagers who seek it out tend to separate sexual activity from relationships, making them much more likely to sexually harass others. Apart from the damage done to the teens themselves, adult leaders are at risk to be sued for inadequate supervision if one teen accuses another of sexual harassment in a church setting.

If a leader finds out that a teen is looking at porn (a picture on a cell phone, for example), the leader should take steps to address the situation. In most cases, this will require informing the parents and referring the teen to counseling. Child pornography is a particularly serious matter, and if a worker becomes aware of child pornography in the hands of a teen, the church's attorney should be contacted immediately.

The leader should be aware of the dangers of porn for themselves. They should have web filtering software installed on their cell phone, tablets, and computers. The software should send a log of all websites visited to the accountability partner. The software should send immediate email alerts to the accountability partner if questionable websites are visited, or if the software has been altered to prevent its functions.

7. The "no fear" rule

The center of judgment in the human brain doesn't fully develop until about age 25. This explains why teens sometimes lack healthy decision-making skills. In fact, often, they think they are invincible, 40-feet tall, and bulletproof.

Youth leaders must watch for risky activities and behavior, both to protect students and to keep themselves free from accusations of negligent supervision. As soon as a dangerous behavior comes up, leaders need to confront the student. When teens are in the care and custody of the church, there must be adequate adult supervision at all times. It is far better to cancel an activity than to risk harm, injury, or accusations.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Communication Boundaries

It's been established that communication boundaries are an important piece of the whole safe youth ministry picture. With that in mind, we asked over 800 pastors and leaders in our *Youth Ministry in America* survey: Does your youth ministry have a written policy outlining how leaders will communicate with students, both electronically and in person?

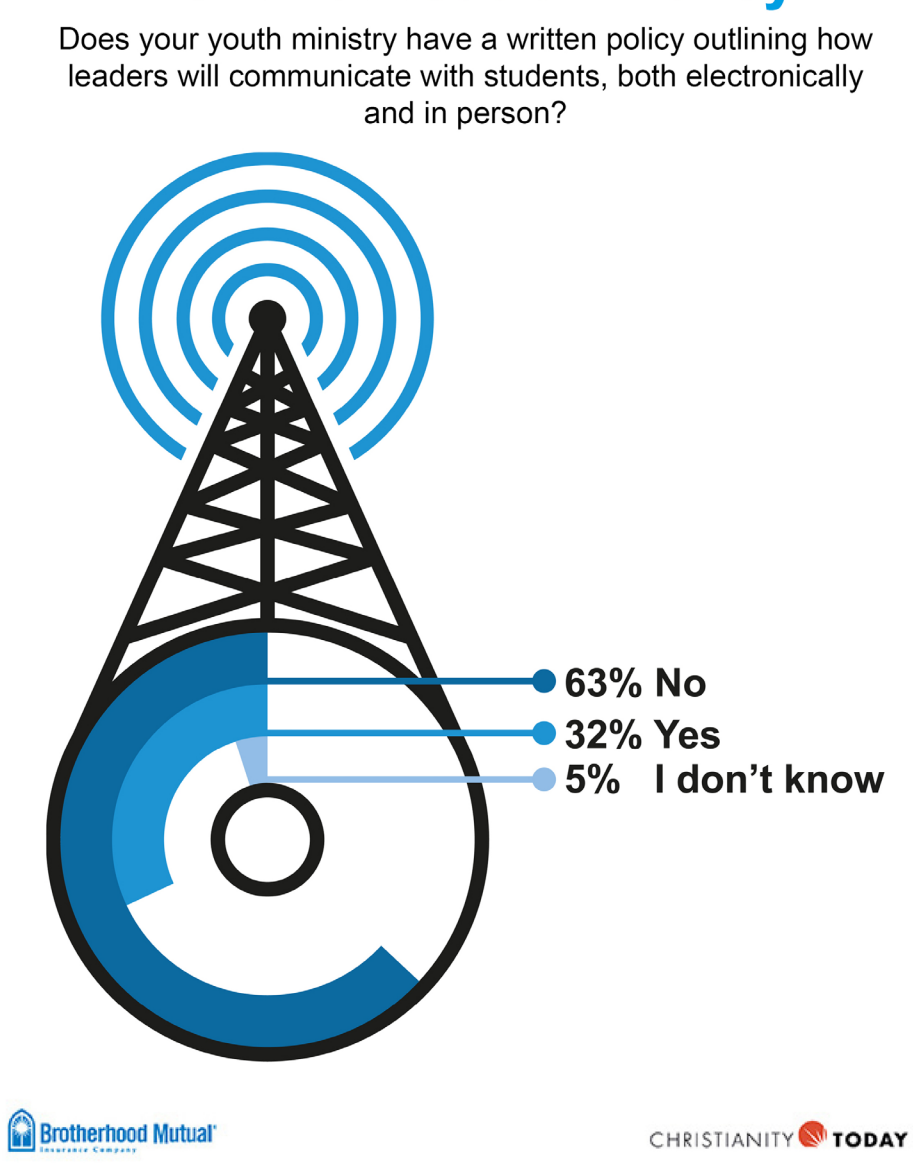
- Large churches are more likely than all others to have a *written policy* on communicating with students.
- Small churches are more likely than all others to say they have *no written policy* on communicating with students.

Breakdown of Survey Respondents

With that in mind, we asked youth pastors and leaders what was happening in the world of youth ministry communication policies. Here's how they responded:

My church doesn't really have any kind of formal policy on communication boundaries—or at least not that's ever been communicated to me as a volunteer. We're a very informal church, a very small youth group. I definitely think it would be helpful for us to have something a little more formal. I mean, we have a group text that our whole youth group is on. We have 15–20 kids. And so any communication that we have with the kids, in terms of whether youth group is happening, where it's happening, and changes of plans, that all happens in the context of that group text. So it's not private at all. Although I, personally, have a couple of students that I mentor with whom I have one-on-one text conversations. They're all female. I wouldn't one-on-one text with male students. But that's something that we don't really have any kind of formal policy on.

Laura Leonard, Illinois Youth Leader



At Willow Creek, the parents have to be notified before there's any kind of electronic communication with their kids. So that's our rule. And then there are some rules about what's communicated and what's said. And the different leaders are also trained about how to read if it's getting away from where it should go, so that they can ask for help or assistance or communication with the parents.

Brian McAuliffe, Willow Creek (Illinois)

Our church doesn't have any "rules" or policies that I know of as far as communication on that level with students. But my wife has access to everything that I have. So whether it's passwords for a Twitter account or Facebook, or texts, or e-mails, there

are just no holds barred. That's how we've done it since we entered into youth ministry in 2001. Ever since then, she's had access to everything whenever she wants it.

Brad Neese, Michigan Teaching Pastor

My church is a pretty archaic church. We just got Wi-Fi last year. This conversation is well beyond the capacity of many of the leaders of our church. So we've had to be very proactive as a student ministry, and we've had to create our own policies, because the church has been very slow to catch up to this issue. We follow that same idea that privacy is an illusion with technology and that in a court setting they can be subpoenaed. We always have the mind of, What will happen if this transcript ends up on a courtroom floor? What is going to be read?

We train our people to never use personal language. So instead of saying, "I like you" or "I want you to be there," we say, "We like you," or "The group wants you to be there." And whenever there is something that's an emergency or urgent, you can always copy and paste. You can screen capture, whatever, and that needs to be reported to the organization. As much as my wife may have access to everything, in a legal sense, my organization is responsible for me, and they need to know the information when it goes south, if it goes south.

So we have a policy of reporting, a chain of command, of who needs to know what when it comes to reporting any level of abuse, any level of sexual inappropriateness, anything like that. And then it becomes a matter for the elder board and senior pastor and that sort of thing. Those are not policies that were put in place by the church. Those were policies that were put in place by me when I got to the church a few years ago to help us speed along that safety net and be ahead of the curve on this one.

Wes Trevor, Colorado Youth Pastor

The thing that we tell our leaders is that we've got to convince our students and ourselves that privacy is an illusion. If you're doing something electronically, it's out there on a tower. It's on somebody's server. Our students have no idea what the NSA is. They do know what hackers are. In Scripture we hear about how sin will come out, or whatever you do in private will be made public, and really it's a reality in this electronic world. The "delete button" means nothing. And so we try to talk to our students that privacy is an illusion, that nothing remains hidden, nothing remains deleted.

Garland Owensby, Volunteer Youth Leader and Professor of Youth Ministry at Southwestern Assemblies of God University, Texas

Establishing a Communication Policy

Many youth ministries don't seem to have a consistent answer to safe communication with students. To get some clarity on the issue, we asked Attorney Frank Sommerville these questions:

What are the best practices for youth pastors in order to maintain safe and legal communication boundaries with their students?

You know, it's very important that youth pastors understand that any time there's a private communication between them and a student, they are placing their entire career into the hands of that student. And right or wrong, they may choose to turn on that youth pastor and say that something happened or was said that was not true, and the youth pastor doesn't have any witnesses or any evidence to dispute that. And the courts and law enforcement are going to assume that the youth is telling the truth.

To prevent the misuse of communication on social media, you need to have boundaries. If students are private-messaging you on Facebook, or texting you one-on-one, that's a problem. The light of transparency really extinguishes a lot of opportunity. Don't use private chat—converse on your Facebook wall or on Twitter in public. Don't use the private sphere, because those can and will be the places where things go wrong.

If a youth texts a youth minister and it needs a response, I strongly suggest the youth minister copy others on that response so that there is a record in case the youth chooses to edit or delete that. You have to also realize that with the technology, the youth porn issues, and the child porn issues out there, and the sexting that's going on, the FBI can revive all of the images and all of the text messages off of a phone, even if it has been erased hundreds of times. So you don't want to leave that trail. You don't want to create any communication trail in the first place without some witnesses, so that if it gets deleted later, or edited later, that you have a true record of what you were communicating.

I would also monitor electronic communications between the youth worker and others. This means that the church would install software on the youth pastor's cell phone so that it copies and sends all text messages (received or sent) to IT staff for review. I would have the youth worker submit his cell phone to bi-weekly, and random, reviews by IT staff. I would also require the youth worker to represent that this was the one and only cell phone that he used. Finally, I would install "key-logger" software on his computers and have the log sent to the IT staff when any inappropriate "keywords" are entered.

How do you navigate consistent social media communication?

When you're talking about social media, or digital media, or texting, you have to understand that those are very serious risks areas. I have a son-in-law who's a youth minister in Houston. And he has a public Facebook account, and he has one for the youth at his church. They can post on it. But he does not maintain any messaging with any of his youth. That's one of the things

we've set up for him. And the youth need to understand that if the youth tells him anything that is harmful, there can be no duty of confidentiality. So, if they're saying, *I'm doing drugs* or *I'm into alcohol*, the youth minister has an affirmative duty to report that.

So if you are in a youth ministry role, you have to be very cognizant when you're counseling kids. It's a very difficult balance, because they need somebody to talk to. And unless it's becoming harmful to them, there's no duty to report. But you don't maintain private texting conversations with the youth. In fact, just recently we handled a situation where parents of a 15-year-old had installed monitoring software on their daughter's iPhone so that her dad got copies of every e-mail, every text message. He started seeing text messages from the youth minister late at night that were inappropriate. Because the parents were vigilant, we were able to stop a tragedy before it happened. But if that youth minister had met with her one-on-one with those text messages, it's likely he would be under arrest today. So it was protecting him as well. He's no longer in youth ministry, but he's also not in jail.

WHAT CAN PARENTS DO?

By Frank Sommerville

I think having meetings at church where we talk to parents about this stuff, about Facebook, social media, Twitter, Instagram—could be incredibly effective. Part of the role of the church can and should be equipping these parents to deal with kids who can run circles around them, technologically. I think most parents are motivated to do that to protect their kids. But they don't have the tools and they don't know how to do it.

We know that the judgment portion of the brain doesn't fully form until the mid-twenties on average, so students . . . they need to be exercising good judgment, that's how they learn to exercise good judgment, but they learn by exercising and failing. But you can't give them total freedom there because they're not ready. I'm not going to take my kid out and teach them to learn how to drive on the freeway the first time out.

You're going to start them out on country roads where the only thing they can hit are garbage cans.

You can never be too vigilant, but at the same time, at some point you just have to trust the Lord. All parenting is inadequate. The perfect parent is in Heaven, looking out for us. I think we bathe our kids in prayer and pray protection over them, I think we did what we could do, and then trusted the Lord with the rest. Scripture talks about not having a spirit of fear but of a sound mind. We're not there to put fear into the hearts of parents. We're doing our part with a sound, reasoning mind as a parent, and when we partner that with the protection of God, that's a pretty powerful combination. I'm not going to say that works 100 percent of the time, because I know it doesn't, but I'm going to do my part and pray for God to do his. And I've started it with my grandkids. I suggested the parents' side of this because I think inadequate attention is paid to the role of parents in this. So what can we do is not from a spirit of fear, but a spirit of power and God's protection, without just assuming that things are going to work out.

CONCLUSION

What Now?

I do a lot of image searches because of speaker presentations. And the most frustrating image search is to search the term youth pastor*, because 70 percent of the images that come up at first are mug shots. And the very first day of my college class, I tell my students, "You know, I can teach you to be the best discipler, the most dynamic speaker, and a great administrator, but if you can't keep your hands out of the offering and your pants up, you're going to be the best youth pastor there is who sells insurance."*

Paul tells Timothy, "Watch your life and your doctrine." It's not just a biblical knowledge that's going to save you. It's also making sure that you're living holiness.

Garland Owensby, Volunteer Youth Leader and
Professor of Youth Ministry at Southwestern
Assemblies of God University, Texas

Youth ministry is a vital part of the church—it helps students grow into Jesus-loving adults. The memories and challenges I learned from youth group are ones I still carry with me today, and I am beyond thankful for every leader and pastor who built into my walk with the Lord. My hope, and

the hope of all who contributed to this resource, is that it will assist you in developing boundaries that will help keep your ministry a safe space for students to grow in Christ.

Help on the Journey

On the next few pages, you'll find an excerpt from Richard Hammar's *Reducing the Risk*, outlining an example* student protection program. This excerpt can be used to help your church create a solid student protection plan. We hope this protection plan, along with the resources listed on the last page of this book, will help you take important next steps in creating a safer environment for your church's youth ministry.

Prayers for you as you continue to ensure the safety of your students. Remember, you're not alone. We're working to help churches across the country, and we will continue to create content that will help you.

God bless you,
Ashley Moore
Assistant Editor, Church Law and Tax

STUDENT PROTECTION PLAN

WHAT WE BELIEVE

We believe it is our responsibility to protect the students in our care. Students and parents need to know that we have taken every reasonable step to ensure children's safety in our ministry.

We believe it is our responsibility to protect staff and volunteer workers in our ministry from being exposed to false accusations of sexual misconduct. To this end, we have screening and supervision policies in place to protect our ministry workers.

We believe it is our responsibility to protect our ministry. By requiring child protection training, as well as implementing screening and supervision policies, we are modeling good safety procedures to others who look to our ministry as an example of a well-run ministry to children and youth.

WHAT WE REQUIRE

1. The six-month rule. The purpose of this rule is to prevent predators from gaining quick access to potential victims. A predator will not want to spend an extended period of time waiting to gain access to children, especially when he can go elsewhere and have almost immediate access. Six months provides a threshold of time for individuals to become better known and gives an opportunity to evaluate their suitability for volunteer service. In some cases, this length of time is reduced based on a person's ability to provide positive character references from other youth-serving organizations and from our ministry leaders, and a person's prior history working with children in a previous faith community.

2. A written application. We require a written Volunteer Service Application before approving an individual for service in our youth ministry. We want to be sure we're selecting the best candidates possible for our ministry programs.

3. Reference checks. Once the written application is complete, we conduct reference checks. Applicants should indicate that they have been a member of the church for a minimum length of time, such as six months, and should list two or more prior service references, preferably from a youth organization, plus personal references from two or more church members.

4. A personal interview. We use the interview time to explore more fully why a candidate wants to work with youth. We also review our ministry's policies and procedures regarding the supervision of students.

5. Additional background checks. We conduct criminal record checks for all paid staff and clergy who will have access to students. We may conduct criminal record checks on youth workers who serve with minors. If you will be driving as part of your ministry service with minors, we will require you to complete a driving information form.

WHAT WE EXPECT

- **Training**—We expect all staff and volunteers to successfully complete our Child and Student Sexual Abuse Prevention Training program.

- **Appropriate physical contact**—No one should ever feel uncomfortable in the way they are being touched. Appropriate touching means offering a gentle touch on the shoulders, hands, arms, head, or back. Inappropriate touching would include kissing; demanding kissing or hugs; touching of the chest, waist, stomach, bottom, or private areas; or any physical contact that feels uncomfortable or violating.

- **Appropriate communication and social media use**—All staff and volunteers should refrain from having private communication with students. Facebook, Twitter, texting, and e-mail should be done in group or open forums, not in private. If the student has something private he or she needs to discuss, parents need to be notified of necessary private communication, and it should be closely monitored.

- **Responding to inappropriate or suspicious behavior**—All staff and volunteers should report any inappropriate or suspicious behavior to a ministry staff leader immediately. This includes reporting any suspected abuse being committed by another worker, as well as any students who presents signs of abuse. No one will ever be in trouble for reporting suspected abuse.

- **Following supervision policies**—Our policies are designed to reduce isolation, increase accountability, and reduce the disparity of power between a worker and a student in our program. We expect all youth workers to follow the supervision policies we have in place to accomplish these goals.

I have read and understand these ministry protection guidelines.

Name _____

Date_____

**Excerpt has been edited to fit within the context of youth ministry.*

About the Contributors

Ashley Moore serves as assistant editor for the Church Law & Tax Group at Christianity Today. She creates e-books and infographics; edits and writes for *Church Law & Tax Report*, *Church Finance Today*, and *ChurchLawAndTax.com*; and contributes to the ManagingYourChurch.com blog.

Frank Sommerville is a shareholder in the law firm of Weycer, Kaplan, Pulaski & Zuber, P.C. in Houston and Dallas, Texas, and an Editorial Advisor for Christianity Today's Church Law & Tax Group. He received his bachelor's degree in business from Texas Wesleyan University. He received his master's degree in professional accounting with an emphasis on taxation from the University of Texas at Arlington. His law degree is from the University of Houston Law Center. He holds a license as a Certified Public Accountant, and he is Board Certified in Tax Law by the Texas Board of Legal Specialization. He is rated AV (highest possible) by the Martindale-Hubbell Legal Directory.

James F. Cobble, Jr., received his master of divinity degree from McCormick Theological Seminary and has doctoral degrees from both Princeton Theological Seminary and the University of Illinois. He combined his training as a pastor and educator with extensive research and writing in the field of church administration—writing or co-writing 20 books and receiving induction into the Church Management Hall of Fame by the National Association of Church Business Administration (NACBA). He is now retired.

Richard R. Hammar is an attorney, CPA, and author specializing in legal and tax issues for churches and clergy. He is a graduate of Harvard Law School and attended Harvard Divinity School. He is senior editor of *Church Law & Tax Report* and the author of several books, including *Pastor, Church &*

Law, the annual *Church and Clergy Tax Guide*, *Reducing the Risk*, the biannual *Compensation Handbook for Church Staff*, and the *Essential Guide to Copyright Law for Churches*.

Lauren Widman has a master's degree in clinical psychology and is currently working toward her doctorate of psychology at Wheaton College. She currently serves in a community counseling center that combines her passions for underserved populations, the church, and international mental health care. She's also a foodie, adventurer, and coffee lover.

Brad Neese serves as a Teaching Pastor and Family Ministry Team Leader at Berrien Center Bible Church in southwest Michigan. As a graduate of Cedarville University and Dallas Theological Seminary, he has been involved in student ministry, juvenile detention centers, jails, homeless shelters, hospitals, and mission outreach. Out of all the 6.8 billion people in the world, only five (soon to be six) can call him Dad, and the only woman crazy enough to marry him graciously agreed to a covenant of marriage over 12 years ago. Above all, he follows Jesus. No one else.

David Middlebrook is an attorney licensed to practice in Texas, Colorado, and the District of Columbia and an Editorial Advisor for Christianity Today's Church Law & Tax Group. His practice emphasis is focused on representing tax-exempt organizations. His clients include all types of charitable, religious, and educational organizations. David graduated with honors with a bachelor's degree in business management in 1985 and earned his juris doctor degree in 1989 from Southern Methodist University. He is a registered congressional lobbyist, where he works on behalf of religious nonprofit organizations for the protection of religious liberties. He co-authored *Nonprofit Law for Religious Organizations: Essential Questions and Answers*, which is a response to the need for guidance, direction, and clarification of legal and tax laws affecting churches and other religious organizations.

Additional Resources

More Resources for Youth Safety in Your Church

Essential Guide to Youth Ministry Safety

Screening Underage Workers

Safe Mentoring Relationships

Safe Youth Trips and Activities

Using Social Media Safely

Juvenile Offenders in the Church

Pastor, Church & Law 4th Edition

Websites

ChurchLawandTax.com/risk

ChurchLawAndTaxStore.com/risk

Thanks for reading. This e-book is not intended to answer every question you will face, but we hope it has provided an orientation to make you more effective in serving the needs of your church. It is designed to provide accurate and authoritative information in regard to the subject matter covered. It is sold with the understanding that neither the authors nor the publisher is engaged in rendering legal, accounting, or professional service. If legal advice or other expert assistance is required, the services of a competent professional person should be sought.