



SAFE CHURCH INITIATIVE

Establishing Practical Safeguards for Counseling

Counseling is an inevitable part of ministry. Yet, many in ministry have given little thought to or have received little preparation for protecting themselves or their congregation from sexual misconduct.

The following suggestions, adapted from *Broken Trust: Confronting Clergy Sexual Misconduct*, compiled by the Christian Life Commission of The Baptist General Convention of Texas, are offered as safeguards to consider:

KNOW THE WARNING SIGNS

- Apply the “publicity test”. What would others think?
- Is there indication of physical arousal ... one’s own or from the other person?
- Are there indications of inordinate sexual fantasy?
- What messages are being given or received from sexual gestures or body language?
- Are you sensitive to intuition, instinct, or just not feeling right?
- Do you feel the need to share intimacies that are not called for?
- Is the person needing counsel wanting too much of your time or attention?
- Do you or the person seeking help shift the focus of conversation to sexual subjects?

TAKE PERSONAL PRECAUTIONS

- Always have another person nearby when counseling.
- Develop a method that prevents total privacy in the counseling office (unlocked door, glass panel, etc.).
- Publish counseling guidelines.
- Limit time for sessions, number of sessions and location of sessions.
- Create a referral list for persons needing long-term counseling.
- Decide in advance and indicate to counselees what touching is appropriate (handshake? brief hug?).

RECOGNIZE BOUNDARY VIOLATIONS

The following are examples of boundary violations in a counseling relationship:

- The conversation becomes increasingly personal.
- Physical contact has moved beyond greetings to inappropriate pats and hugs.
- Either party fantasizes about a sexual relationship.
- The counselor offers to drive the person receiving counseling home.
- The counselor arranges meetings outside of the normal counseling time.
- The counselor increasingly hides feelings and meetings from accountability systems, especially the counselor’s spouse.

ESTABLISH A SUPPORT SYSTEM

- Work on a wholesome and healthy marriage.
- Commit to a covenant of counselor sexual ethics and enter into accountability covenants with responsible colleagues or personal counselors.
- Work on issues with mentors and healthy ministry models.
- Model on Jesus' example of ministering to those of the opposite sex.

*Adapted from materials developed by the Baptist General Convention of Texas. Used with permission.
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