

Suggestions for Ecclesiastical Leaders
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Handling Confession

Note: This article has been written to provide information and support for ecclesiastical leaders when handling a confession from a congregation member who is struggling with pornography or sexual addiction issues. The information in this article is based on countless hours spent with clients who have had the experience of confessing. It is no easy thing to confess sins and it requires a special humility in order to do so. From the countless stories I have heard there seems to be some things that are more useful than others. The purpose of this article is to share those with you. The information in this article is my opinion only. If it can be useful to you my purpose has been served.

Handling a confession of one who struggles with pornography or sexual addiction issue is a very sensitive and challenging matter for many ecclesiastical leaders. The very nature of addiction involves continued attempts at sobriety with lapses in between. This can become extremely frustrating but such individuals need continued support and encouragement. It is the “lapses in between” that cause ecclesiastical leaders the most frustration and concern. Slips, lapses and relapses don’t seem to fit into the part of repentance that has to do with forsaking the sin. Unfortunately in recovery work with addicts the forsaking of the sin is a process rather than an event. The very term addiction means that you take a stand only to then cross the line time and time again.

The first thing to remember is that anyone who comes in on their own free will to confess what they feel inside is sinful behavior needs to be respected. It is not an easy thing to do and the intent behind the confession is almost always due to the desire to change and to get themselves right with God again. It is an honorable person who has the courage to seek help in the first place.

The way in which a leader responds and communicates can make it either more or less likely that a person will feel safe enough to talk about what is really going on with them. When one is treated with dignity, understanding, sensitivity and respect they are more likely to leave your office feeling uplifted and hopeful about the future. It is vital to remember that when anyone comes in to confess they are already feeling pretty badly about themselves. The viewing of pornography creates deep levels of inner turmoil and

shame. I've yet to have a client report to me that they have felt good about a slip or relapse. The response is always the same; frustration, disappointment in themselves and sometimes despair.

I believe that it is helpful to understand what research has verified over and over again when counseling those with addiction problems. Confrontational counseling has been associated with high dropout rates and relatively poor outcomes. Many begin the confession process by testing the waters by making a partial confession as to the extent of the problem. If a person picks up that the leader is responding in a harsh and critical way, it is likely that they may shut down. I have had many clients report to me that this is what they did because they didn't feel safe. They began the confession process but then quickly shut down because they picked up how disappointed, shocked or disgusted their leader was with them.

The power of healing is strongly influenced by interpersonal interactions. Four important and research verified conditions that can help prepare the way for natural change are:

Empathy
Understanding
Warmth
Genuineness

Empathy has been called the defining principle in any therapeutic relationship. It is a term loosely used in therapy circles, but what does it really mean? One definition (Webster's) is: *the capacity for participation in another's feelings or ideas*. Another definition of empathy is: *the capacity to think and feel oneself into the inner life of another person*. In a very real sense the one true master of empathy would be the Savior Himself because it was He who took upon Himself our individual sins and weaknesses. He is the only one that is uniquely qualified to really understand on a personal level where an individual is at and what would help them the most at that particular time. Leaders are thus called upon to seek wisdom beyond their own when meting out *Justice* and *Mercy* according to individual needs. Also, prearranged and fixed blanket

punishments without room for personalization may not only result in partial confession but the confessor may shy away altogether fearful that a punishment has already been allotted. Penitence, progression and circumstances vary with each individual.

Closely tied to the concept of empathy is that of understanding. Research has indicated that for some the very experience of feeling understood opens the door to change. As one client reported saying, “you have no idea how good it felt to be listened to that way.”

Take the time and be present with those who come in to talk to you. They look to you as spiritual advisors and want to feel that God has not given up on them. “Act like you’ve got only fifteen minutes, it’ll take all day; act like you’ve got all day, it might take fifteen minutes.

Listening for understanding is a lot easier said than done. When we try to jump in and fix things too quickly by giving advice the doors of empathy and understanding can quickly close. What people mostly desire is to be listened to and understood. The change that they are seeking can only come from within themselves but usually the catalyst for that change is to feel understood. The tendency of most of us is to try and fix the problem by telling people what they should do. People don’t want to be told what to do, they want to be listened to. In most cases they already know what they should do. Paradoxically, when we try to push or pressure someone into changing something, it has the tendency to create the opposite effect. The founder of the 12 step movement Bill Wilson stated the following, “We found that addicts would not take pressure in any form. They had to be led, not pushed.”

Warmth and Genuineness means that you can demonstrate the ability to listen without condemning. It also means that you can create a safe environment for the truth to be discussed and explored and that you’re not putting on an act.

When a person comes in to confess it is important to gather some basic information as to the nature and duration of the problem behavior in order to best help them. In order to find the balance between Justice and Mercy it is helpful to get a clear picture as to the truth. The way you are with those who come to confess will play a big part in to whether they will feel comfortable with a full confession or just a partial confession. If a leader

responds without empathy and love the confession will most likely only be a partial confession.

Using open-ended questions is useful in gathering meaningful information. Some suggestions of what to ask might be:

- I assume from the fact that you are here, that you have some things you want to talk over. What would you like to discuss?
- What worries you about your current situation?
- What makes you feel that you need to do something about this situation?
- I'm curious to how all this got started can you tell me more about that?
- How long have you been dealing with these issues and what have you attempted to do about them in the past?

After getting a clear picture of the problem you can then determine how to best help them. When someone has been dealing with pornography or sexual addiction issues for many years the best thing that you can do is refer him or her to professional counselors who specialize in the treatment of this issue. If a person has already been through the confession cycle time and time again it is unlikely that they are going to change without that help. There have been great inroads made in understanding how this addiction works and what helps in maintaining sobriety. Oddly enough the repeated confession cycle to church leaders can become a part of the addictive cycle.

The real challenge for ecclesiastical leaders seems to be in finding that unique balance of encouragement without in anyway condoning or minimizing the sin. In reality if this sin is not checked it can lead to far worse things. It is progressive and destructive by nature. Leaders need to clearly give that message while at the same time not being too harsh or condemning. If a leader comes across as too harsh or condemning they can actually feed into the addiction cycle due to the way the Limbic part of the brain works. Remember that addicts will not be pressured they must be led. I have had more than just a few clients inform me that they will never go back to certain leaders with their problems because it just made it worse. They left feeling condemned, threatened and hopeless. If a

person goes out of an ecclesiastical leaders office feeling worse than when they went in, the probability that they will go through that process again has been decreased. Again, remember that the way in which a leader responds and communicates can make it either more or less likely that a person will feel safe enough to talk about what is really going on with them and thus begin the process of recovery and change.

The goal of this article is to encourage the proper balance of justice and mercy when dealing with an individual who struggles with this addiction. It appears that when one is out of balance on the justice side the individual suffers and also, when one is out of balance on the mercy side the individual suffers. It is true that mercy cannot rob justice but it is also true that mercy can satisfy the demands of justice. It is my opinion that when one is trying and willing to confess and enter treatment if necessary, that mercy comes into play notwithstanding the continued struggle with the addiction. Does one need to be perfect in order for the atonement of the Savior to come into effect? What addicts struggle with is a thirst that never seems to go away. The work of recovery is to help them understand that there is water that can satisfy that thirst. “But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life”. -John 4:14

They must be led and not pushed to that source.

The way in which an ecclesiastical leader responds to those who suffer with this addiction can either help lead them towards this water the Savior is talking about or away from it.

Comment or questions are welcome by emailing innergold@gmail.com

