

FIGHT PORN IN YOUR CHURCH

WHAT WORKS AND WHY IT MATTERS

By Luke Gilkerson

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Dead. That's exactly how John felt that morning as he faced the platform. He was singing along with the music, eyes closed, trying to focus on the lyrics, trying to lift his heart to God as best he knew how. But like many Sundays before, his soul felt shriveled and uncomfortably numb. If those who stood around him only knew the depths of his sin, how would they treat him?

If they knew about the websites he visited the night before, what would they say?

What would his wife say?

Men like John are all too common in the church today. According to Pure Desire Ministries, after collecting thousands of surveys from churches all over America, men like John comprise 60-70% of the men in our pews (plus 25-30% of women, and sadly, 50-58% of church leaders).

Can churches become communities where people like John find repentance, hope, and healing?

The good news is many leading churches are striving for this, and they are reshaping the culture of the church to change lives.

DRY DRUNKS IN THE PEWS

How could so many Christians be so sexually broken and go unnoticed? Is this problem really as large as it is made out to be?

According to Leadership Journal, more than half (57%) of pastors surveyed say porn addiction is the most sexually damaging issue to their congregation.

Some in the pews are undeniably addicts of the first degree: their sexual compulsions have brought them to unfathomable depths of perversion. And they are paying dearly for it.

But others have only convinced themselves they don't have a problem. Ted Roberts of Pure Desire likens these men and women to "dry drunks": they watch a little porn now and then, they masturbate, they sexually fantasize, but they would never call themselves "addicts." Outwardly their sexual habits might pass for unharmed, but inwardly they are filled with loneliness, bitterness, and lust. Their marriages are far from intimate. Their fellowship with others is shallow at best. And week after week they lose a little more hope that things will ever be different.

"Our church, every church, all this culture are awash in lust, pornography, and every manner of sexual perversion," [says Pastor John Piper](#) of Bethlehem Baptist Church. "We are, in fact, so awash that we've become fish who don't even dream about air anymore."

OPENING THE CAN OF WORMS: TAKING ON TABOOS

Some church leaders have said enough is enough, and they have become intentional and strategic about tackling this issue head-on.

James Reeves, senior pastor of Celebration Fellowship in Fort Worth, likens the damage of pornography to a coming tsunami. "The issue of sexual addiction caught us unaware at first," Reeves writes. "All around us marriages began to fall apart, husbands started getting caught with pornography, in affairs, and visiting prostitutes, and we knew we had to do something. Although we were heavily involved in recovery ministry already, we knew very little about how to deal with the specific issue of sexual addiction. So we got informed, educated, and went to work."

On Sept. 21, 2003, they devoted a special Sunday to the issue, entitled, "The Day Celebration Told the Truth about Pornography." They had a panel discussion where six couples and one man, all of whom were in recovery, told their stories. They spoke about the shame, frustration, and despair that comes with this addiction, and they talked about their path to recovery so far.

Reeves didn't announce the topic beforehand to his congregation so people would not come up with convenient excuses to miss church that morning. "From that day forward," says Reeves, "we were off and running in ministering to men, women, and families caught in this area."

Even smaller churches are taking action. Rev. Hank Van der Woerd ministers to a growing congregation of 250 families in the immigrant community in Southern

Alberta, Canada. Even among this farming community, the members of Trinity United Reformed Church are no strangers to the problem of pornography.

Rev. Van der Woerd, along with ministers from surrounding churches, decided to organize a seminar for all their men, age 14 and up, where they communicated biblical, psychological, and practical advice for men facing this temptation. The event was well-attended, and while there were some naysayers, critics were soon silenced when they were confronted with the enormity of the problem.

For the elders of Trinity, this is only the beginning of their approach to this problem. Determined to help their 900 members, the elders have decided to set aside funds every year to purchase Covenant Eyes Internet Accountability for any family who wants it in their church. They are sending a message to the church-at-large: we want to be a community of hope and healing, where secrets sins can be brought into the light.

THE INEVITABLE FIGHT WITH SHAME

For many men and women who deeply struggle with sexual sin, a feeling of shame clings to them like a wet blanket and often become the biggest barrier against seeking help. Biblical counselor David Powlison says [shame and guilt are related but distinct experiences](#). “Guilt is an awareness of failure against a standard,” such as a rule or a personal expectation. But shame, says Powlison, is “a sense of failure before the eyes of someone else.” Shame is overtly relational.

For many porn and sex addicts, the shame is so acute, being open and honest in a spiritual community sounds like the last thing they want to do. So for churches that are proactive about this issue, disinfecting the shame-dynamic is a constant battle.

DISINFECTING SHAME AT HOSPITAL CHURCH

And religious environments, unfortunately, encourage masks and pretension. A few decades ago, Pastor James Reeves came to believe that the church (as he experienced it) was not a safe place to talk about real problems.

Reeves was saved at age 18 right off the street. He grew up, as he says, “poor white trash in a tin-roof house.” He was no stranger to drugs and alcohol. His own father died a penniless alcoholic in a flop house. Coming to Christ brought about a radical change in his life and eventually, after college, he entered a life of vocational ministry.

However, six years into his pastoral career he sunk into an inexplicable and deep depression. His fellow church leaders gave him a short sabbatical, during which Reeves discovered how insufficiently he had recovered from the hurts and sins of his past. He returned to his church, not only refreshed, but with a new vision for what he wanted his church to become. He desires his church to become a place where people felt free to bring their deepest hurts and their biggest secrets.

He calls it “Hospital Church.”

The church, says Reeves, is meant to be like a hospital gown. “The hospital gown is designed not for concealment but easy access.” Reeves dreams of a church where people can be completely transparent—warts and all—and for the past 20 years, Reeves and the leaders of Celebration Fellowship have worked hard to intentionally create an atmosphere of grace to make transparency possible.

Similarly, Dr. Bill Berry of Central Church in Collierville, Tennessee, says battling the shame-orientation is crucial to helping men and women come out of hiding. Dr. Berry has been the director of Battle Plan Ministries for 12 years in his church, and through this program he has watched scores of men walk out of the darkness of porn addiction and into the light.

He knew men and women were seeking private counseling for these problems—a tactic he calls “covert warfare”—but he wanted his church to be a place where men could be honest publically about their struggles. Berry says he started Battle Plan for this very reason: to change the culture of his church and give men a safe forum for being honest without fear of condemnation.

He now oversees four Battle Plan groups around the Memphis area.

MODELING BROKENNESS FROM THE FRONT

Where does transparency start? Jon Acuff calls Christian leaders to give “[the gift of going second](#).” When one brave soul speaks first, when he or she shares the raw and dirty details off their life, others in the room are given “the gift of going second.”

It’s so much harder to be first. No one knows what’s off limits yet and you’re setting the boundaries with your words. You’re throwing yourself on the honesty grenade and taking whatever fall out that comes with it. Going second is so much easier. And the ease only grows exponentially as people continue to share. But it has to be started somewhere. Someone has to go first, and I think it has to be us.

In the New York metropolitan area, Grace Community Church reaches thousands with its weekend services. Nearly every week Pastor Jarrod Jones will stand on the platform and remind his congregation, “This is a church where it’s okay to not be okay.” Jones, himself, is no stranger to the struggle of sexual sin. He writes candidly about what he has learned from his own struggles in his book, *13 Ways to Ruin Your Life*.

This environment of grace is one of the reasons why their Men’s L.I.F.E. Accountability Group is as strong as it is. Mike Pagna, who leads this Saturday morning fellowship, believes strongly that leaders need to set the pace when it comes to transparency. “I don’t care if I’m labeled a sex addict,” he says. Wanting more guys to come clean about their struggles, he would create venues to tell his story: men’s breakfasts, youth group events, anywhere he was given a platform. This not only drew guys to his group, but it also empowered men to be honest when they got there. “The leader needs to really, really lay it out. I need to lead with my junk so other guys can talk about theirs.”

This is the same approach used by Pastor Darrell Brazell of New Hope Fellowship in Lawrence, Kansas. Brazell struggled with pornography since he was 10. He pursued a career in ministry believing if he devoted his life to God in full-time service, God would make his sexual struggles go away. When this did not happen, his heart was eaten alive with shame, and the addiction only became worse.

Brazell started to find freedom when he opened up about his struggle to other fellow pastors. Because of his willingness to share his story with others, more and more men came to Brazell for help for their sexual sins. In October 2003, Brazell founded New Hope Fellowship, and to this day its sexual addiction recovery ministry is the church’s largest outreach to the surrounding community.

Brazell knows his situation is unique: not every pastor’s story is like his own. But he believes strongly that pastors need to be honest about their own weaknesses. “If the teaching pastors do not understand their own brokenness and constantly proclaim grace, no recovery ministry is going to thrive.”

SAFE PLACE, SAFE PROCESS

Pastor Reeves says churches often make two mistakes when they reach out to sexually broken people: their church is either not a safe place, or they do not create a safe process. You need both, he says.

“The church has to be a safe place for people to tell their secrets and has to have a safe process for people to experience emotional and spiritual healing,” says Reeves. You can preach about grace and transparency, but if you don’t provide a forum for people to be disciplined, learn, and grow, you will never see change. Similarly, you can create groups where sexual strugglers can go, but if the church is not a safe place to be a sexual struggler, very few people will take advantage of these ministries.

THE PROCESS: SUPPORT GROUPS

Support groups for sexual struggles, sometimes called “Freedom Groups” or “Healing Groups,” vary from church to church. But there are common features you are likely to find in most successful groups.

1. SETTING EXPECTATIONS

After newcomers are welcomed, support group leaders set the tone by telling all attendees what to expect. What will be the format of the meeting? How long will it be? Will what we say be kept confidential? This is also a time to get any necessary announcements out of the way.

2. LARGE GROUP TEACHING

Battle Lines, a ministry of Second Baptist Church in Houston, has been in existence for eight years. As many as 70 attend on a Tuesday night. Benno Bauer, who counsels men in the church with sexual addictions, leads these groups. For the teaching portion, he asks specific men who are further in their recovery to present what they are learning, usually based on written material the group is using.

Often these lay leaders will use stories from their own lives to supplement the material in the curriculum. “One time a guy brought in his wife’s personal journal, and he read portions of her words aloud to the group about the pain and confusion she felt because of his sexual addiction,” says Bauer. “This totally set the tone of the group that night.”

In some groups like Battle Lines, the large group teaching ends with a circle of prayer.

Offering some kind of teaching is critical for a number of reasons. Brad Hambrick, Pastor of Counseling at The Summit Church in Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina, says the teaching and large group discussion times ease attendees into the subject matter.

The teaching portion is a time to “use third person pronouns,” he says. Often people do not want to discuss their personal problems right away, and the teaching portion allows all to participate without feeling a need to be completely transparent.

The teaching time also helps attendees reframe how they understand their sinful behavior. Ted Roberts believes the breaking of “denial structures” is one of the most important things that needs to happen in recovery. Often those who are ensnared in sexual sin are also entrenched in denial. They deny the strength or perversity of their sin (“I’m not an addict”). They deny the extent of their sin (“This doesn’t hurt anyone”). They deny their helplessness (“I just need to pray more, read more, and try harder”). These denial structures need to be dismantled by good teaching.

The teaching time also lays out God’s means of sanctification provided in the gospel. Pastor Hambrick has developed a comprehensive video and written curriculum called “False Love: Overcoming Sexual Sin from Pornography to Adultery.” This nine-step curriculum presents sexual sin through a gospel framework and it is used in their healing groups for sex addicts. These steps, Hambrick says, “present the gospel in slow motion,” outlining how the good news of Christ frees us not just from the guilt of sin, but also from its grip.

3. SMALL GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Depending on the size of the meeting, participants break off into smaller huddles where they can discuss how the material they are learning applies to them specifically.

At New Hope Fellowship these are called “check-in groups.” Pastor Brazell insists the groups be only three or four people. “Two isn’t safe, and five takes too long,” he says. The purpose of these check-ins is to talk about how each person is doing: sin is confessed, new goals are set, and members are prayed for.

The key to these smaller huddles is quality leadership dispersed throughout the room. John Doyel runs a group of 40-50 men at Vineyard Columbus (Ohio) called “180.” Leadership development, Doyel says, is the most important issue for starting a quality support group. “Good leaders are very hard to find.”

Ideally Doyel looks for men who have had at least six months of “sobriety” from their own sexual sins (no masturbation, no pornography, no sexually acting out) and have taken the Vineyard’s Healing Prayer course. If an established leader stumbles once or twice, this is not a problem. But if a habit reemerges, they are removed from leadership for a season so they can receive help.

At Celebration Fellowship, leaders are selected from among group members who have been involved for at least a year and have shown personal growth. After they are selected, they are placed into an intensive mentorship for another year with one of the established leaders in the program.

The result of these smaller huddles is real community. Friendships are forged. People experience genuine care and compassion.

In these smaller groups, members also find accountability and encouraging relationships. If Internet pornography has been a stumbling block, many of these churches recommend members use Covenant Eyes Internet Accountability software to assist them in their accountability conversations.

HEALTHY TENSIONS

Good recovery groups usually do not operate perfectly from Day 1. They are forged and re-forged over months and even years.

Proactive churches that are delving into recovery ministry will face a number of tensions. Wise pastors and group leaders will anticipate these tensions and navigate them intentionally.

TENSION #1: HOW DO WE MAKE SPECIFIC GROUPS FOR THOSE WHO STRUGGLE WHILE NOT STIGMATIZING THE SIN?

If church leaders are not conscious of this tension, the result may be a poorly executed, poorly attended group.

“Recovery is not a program; it’s a paradigm shift,” says Pastor Reeves. “Everyone needs it, not just the so-called addict.” All of us, he says, are sin-addicts. All are broken and in need of repair. When we create sin-specific groups but we do not communicate this truth to the church community, we end up creating a segregated group that’s just for the perverts.

One of the ways Celebration Fellowship communicates this message is by offering marriage enrichment ministries for all the couples in their church. These enrichment classes utilize the same principles used in their Freedom Groups. This backdoor approach, he says, helps men and women to realize: Hey, “this stuff” is for everybody, not just the so-called sickos.

The Summit Church takes a similar approach. All Freedom Group materials are presented through special seminars that are made available to the whole church. All small group leaders, not just those involved in the recovery ministries, are encouraged to attend these seminars. Freedom Groups are formed based around this material, but all small groups in the church are encouraged to make use of the material. The curriculum then becomes a part of the DNA of Summit's small group life. This de-stigmatizes the sin and helps many small groups to become hubs of healing.

At Grace Community, group leader Mike Pagna navigates this tension by changing the format of his accountability group on the last Saturday of each month and invites as many men as he can for a fellowship breakfast. Pagna hits up as many of the elders and leaders in his church to come and invite other men. During this breakfast he picks a willing guy to share his story of sexual brokenness and recovery in front of the whole group. They have already started seeing this change the perception of the group in the church overall.

TENSION #2: HOW DO I FORM A GROUP FOCUSED ON A SPECIFIC SIN AND NOT BECOME SIN-CENTERED?

The first tension addresses how the church at-large stigmatizes a specific sin or problem. This second tension deals with how group members can tend to identify themselves with their own sin.

"Hi, I'm _____, and I'm a sex addict."

To a group leader, hearing this honest admission from a new member sounds like progress. But hearing this from a group member whose been around for years is a sign that he or she has become too sin-centered.

"This is a tension to be managed, not a problem to be solved," says Pastor Jason Albelo of East Hill Church in Gresham, Oregon. Any time a church develops a recovery ministry for a specific issue, this tension will present itself. He says their church is constantly relearning this lesson. "We must strive to be Christ-centered," Albelo says. "We see guys able to grow in their capacity to manage porn or lust, but then totally lose it in other areas or atrophy in their knowledge and experience of God."

East Hill experienced rapid growth in their healing groups early on, but some of them very quickly became "binge and purge" groups, Albelo confesses. Members were becoming myopic, focusing merely on breaking free from acute sins and white-

knuckling it all the way. Pastor Abelo says, “The right focus is Christ himself, His grace, and the total life-change He is asking each person to make.”

At The Summit Church, involvement in all Freedom Groups is designed to be short-term for this very reason. “We don’t want these groups to allow people to say, ‘I am my sin or suffering,’” says Pastor Hambrick. “We don’t want that identity to replace who they are in Christ.”

Summit’s Freedom Groups are specifically modeled to look and feel similar to the rest of their small groups. Members work through the steps of the program, and as they near completion they are encouraged to get involved in another group. “We tell our graduates, ‘We have 50 of our small group leaders who’ve all gone through this same material. We can direct you to any of those groups if you are interested.’”

Even in a church like New Hope Fellowship, with a large and thriving sexual addiction ministry, the focus is always intimacy with Christ, not just pornography. As one of their church member states, “I came to New Hope wanting to not look at dirty pictures, and instead it has impacted every aspect of my life, all my relationships. It’s a whole new paradigm.”

TENSION #3: DO I MAKE THE GROUP OPEN TO ALL OR DO I HAVE SOME KIND OF SELECTION PROCESS?

Many churches opt for an “open group” where new members can come at any time, but doing this, good leaders still recognize that real life change will not happen for those who aren’t committed.

Benno Bauer at Second Baptist intentionally makes his group meetings 90 minutes or longer, followed by smaller accountability discussion groups. He believes this is one factor that helps to weed out those who are not serious about recovery from those who are.

Mike Pagna’s group meets on Saturday morning at 7 o’clock. “If you are willing to come then,” he comments, “then it means you’re serious.”

Dr. Berry from Central Church and Darrell Brazell from New Hope take the approach of personally interviewing prospective members who are interested in attending. These interviews are partially for diagnostic purposes: they want to hear these men’s personal testimonies and histories. But these interviews also help to give each man clear expectations about the recovery ministries. These groups are first and foremost not just support groups: they are holistic discipleship ministries.

TENSION #4: SHOULD WE DEVOTE OUR TIME TO HELPING SEXUAL STRUGGLERS OR SHOULD WE HELP THEIR SPOUSES, TOO?

Pornography and other sexual sins are not just “guy problems.” Ted Roberts says these are “family systems” problems. Neglecting care for the families of sexual strugglers is categorically one of the worst mistakes a church can make in this area.

Churches with thriving sex addiction ministries quickly learn the importance of ministering to spouses. Some churches minister to women through pastoral guidance or personal counseling. Others offer complimentary groups for wives betrayed by sexual sin. Partners in Purity. Begin Again. Wounded Women: Mended Hearts. Faithful Warriors. Betrayal and Beyond. These are just a few of the groups that have cropped up in churches throughout the country.

While Troy and Melissa Haas were missionaries in Africa, Troy committed adultery. This not only ended their missionary career, it shattered Melissa’s world. Upon returning to the United States she got involved in a wives’ support group, and through this [a vital change took place in her](#).

It was a very sad time for me, because I realized there was not one person I felt like I could call and say, ‘This is what has happened in my life.’ I had, in ministry, isolated myself from others because I thought spiritually mature believers didn’t need anybody. So when I walked into my first spouses’ group and was just one of ‘them,’ something happened in me that transcended anything that I had ever felt in the church. That was this whole idea that we were created for the ‘one anothers’ in Scripture, that community is vital to our healing and our souls. And I had missed that. I didn’t even know how starved I was for that.

Having been a missionary, Melissa remembers, on many occasions, watching the lone wildebeest at the back of the herd being eaten. She knows now that women isolated from a supportive community are just as vulnerable. Melissa now runs wives’ support groups through Hope Quest. “I say this to spouses all the time: When we are not alone, we often have the strength to make choices that would have terrified us before. When we are not alone, it somehow gives us the strength to face our greatest hurts.”

RESOURCES FOR GROUPS

[**False Love: Overcoming Sexual Sin from Pornography to Adultery**](#) - This free seminar series offered by The Summit Church presents a comprehensive biblical approach to sexual sin and is specifically designed to be used in freedom groups by lay leaders.

[**True Betrayal: Overcoming the Betrayal of Your Spouse's Sexual Sin**](#) - This complimentary seminar series taught by Brad Hambrick is used in The Summit's freedom group for spouses. The videos are made available online for free for any church that wishes to use them.

[**Closing the Window: Steps to Living Porn-Free**](#) - Dr. Tim Chester's book is now being used by recovery groups all over the world. It is a raw, honest look at the problem of pornography in our culture and what the Bible has to say about it.

[**A Neuro-Theology of Sex & Addiction**](#) - Pastor Darrell Brazell presents information we learn from brain scans of those impacted by sexual addiction and pornography. This teaching is interwoven with a robust presentation of God's design for sexuality.

[**At the Altar of Sexual Idolatry**](#) (plus Workbook and Leaders Guide) - Steve Gallagher of Pure Life Ministries presents a comprehensive theology of sexual sin.

L.I.F.E. Guides for [Men](#), [Women](#), [Spouses](#), and [Couples](#) - Mark Laaser, a Christian authority on sexual addiction, and his team have written this material specifically for support groups. These books are considered by many to present the best integrational approaches (clinical and biblical) to these subjects.

[**Seven Pillars of Freedom**](#) - This workbook, along with other materials from Pure Desire, is being used in thousands of churches. This book presents a unique approach to "renewing the mind" from a neurological and biblical perspective.