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Becoming a Sexually Faithful Church



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HARVEST USA brings the truth and mercy of Jesus Christ by:

- Helping individuals and families affected by sexual struggles
- Providing resources that address biblical sexuality to individuals and churches

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The play *Fiddler on the Roof* is one of my favorites. The plot explores the intersection of past, present, and future for one family in pre-revolution Russia. Told from the perspective of the father of the family, Tevye, we experience the tension he faces living in a world that is changing all-too-quickly. Longtime social conventions are changing. The political climate is changing. Religious persecution is beginning. The entire way of life for all of Tevye's neighbors has abruptly transformed into something none of them completely understands. Tevye faces the question: *What kind of a man am I going to be in this changing world?*

You and I live in a similar situation in 2019. The culture we live in has undergone tremendous social change. So much of that change has been focused on an evolving understanding of personhood, human identity, and social boundaries, with God and his authority swept to the sidelines. Today, we live in a world that, like Tevye's, has shunned the traditions and conventions of the past. We too face a question: What kind of people are we Christians going to be in this changing world?

That's a question that Harvest USA wants to help you answer. This issue of *harvestusa magazine* looks back, with thanksgiving, over 35 years of God's goodness to us in ministry. And, it looks forward to the next 35 years (Lord willing!) of our ministry to the Church.

The Sexually Faithful Church Initiative is a major component of how Harvest USA is helping the Church to be proactive in answering difficult questions about sexuality and gender, primarily through discipling church members to understand and trust in the wisdom and glory of God's design for sex, sexuality, and gender. We'll talk about the sexually faithful church in this issue.

Through our involvement with churches in our Sexually Faithful Church Initiative, we want to help the Church to compassionately and truthfully respond to questions being raised by the culture, questions such as:

- What does God say about sex and gender?
- Why can't I decide my own gender?

- What right does God have to tell me how I use my body?
- Why should sex be reserved for marriage?
- Why do you say that LGBTQ+ behavior is sinful?

The Sexually Faithful Church Initiative will help Harvest USA expand its ministry to individuals and families affected by sexual and gender-related struggle and sin in the years to come. We want to come alongside the Church through simultaneously equipping the Church to do its part in ministering to God's people, and through ministering to individual Christians when the Church isn't able to.

I know you share with me the gravity of living in a world that is increasingly hostile toward God, his Word, and his people, the Church. I invite you to take comfort in the fact that this is precisely how God intends the world to function at this point in history. I encourage you to take comfort, as do I, in what the writer of Ecclesiastes says in 3:14-15:

...Whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done it, so that people fear before him. That which is, already has been: that which is to be, already has been; and God seeks what has been driven away.

As we pursue this evolving area of ministry together, let us take comfort in the fact that God has already sovereignly determined that his Church will stand; his Word will continue to bring people to conviction of sin and salvation in Christ; his saints will persevere and see the fruit of the Gospel even in the midst of a culture that hates them. Nothing can stop the plans of our God!

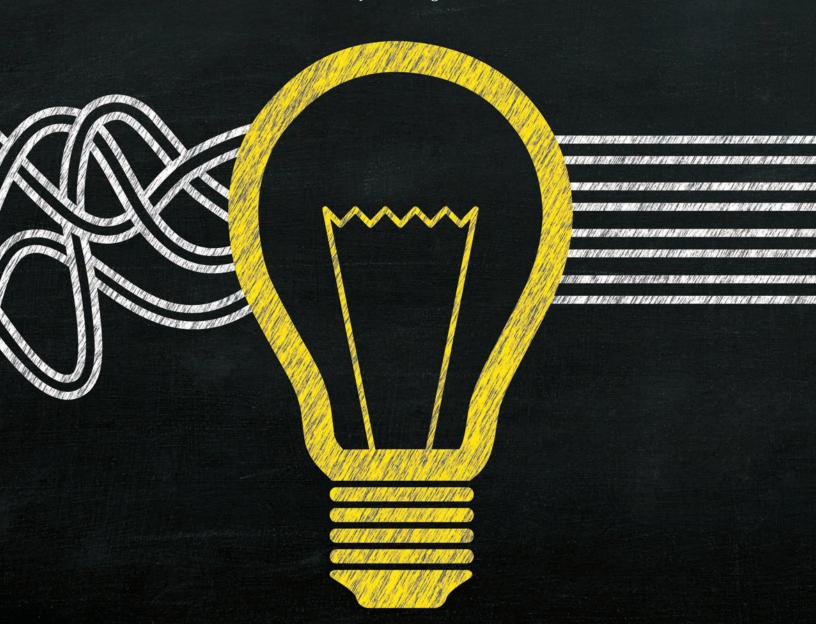
In Him,

Tim Geiger **U**

President, Harvest USA

Sexually Faithful Church?

By Tim Geiger



Ed was feeling overwhelmed. The couple that just left his office had been there for marriage counseling. The wife angrily revealed in the session that she discovered her husband had been looking at gay pornography. When she confronted him about it, he confessed that it had been a lifelong struggle. She felt betrayed, hurt, and doubtful that someone like her husband could ever change.

That counseling session came on the heels of last week's revelation that one of the girls in the senior high youth group had come out as transgender and wanted her peers and youth leaders to call her by a male name. And, there was a church session meeting just days prior, where a major topic of conversation was how to effectively discipline a church member who was in an adulterous affair.

As Ed sat in his office, looking out the window, he found himself asking the question: Lord! What do I do?

Ed's experience illustrates a growing problem many pastors, elders, and other church leaders face: how to respond to sexual and gender-related sin and struggle in the church. How do you minister to the strugglers

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themselves and help them walk in increasing faith and repentance? How do you comfort and support family members who are directly impacted by their loved ones' struggle and sin? How do you respond to church members who resist repentance? And, how and when do you engage formal church discipline?

Those actions are all good and necessary. But, they are all reactive. They come into play after the struggle or sin has been exposed and after it has caused so much damage to the lives of God's saints. And, they constitute only one part of the ministerial responsibility pastors and church leaders face.

The other side of the pastoral care coin (and the more important of the two) is the call for the church to *proactively* equip its members to walk in accord with God's timeless, sovereign, holy, and wise design for sex, sexuality, and gender. At a minimum, being proactive helps Christians understand the inherent goodness of God's created order when the temptation comes to selfishly misuse it. Proactively preparing God's people for life in the post-Christian, antiauthoritarian, "authentic self" 21st Century goes a long way toward heading off life-dominating struggle and sin in the first place.

Proactively preparing God's people could have potentially minimized the impact of the painful challenges now faced by those people in Ed's church. Could proactive ministry have even prevented some of these issues in the first place? Possibly. As Ed silently pondered his question to the Lord, he asked himself: Is there anything I could have done differently so that these people wouldn't be struggling in the ways they are now? Is there anything I could have done in advance so I wouldn't be dealing with these broken lives now?

To minister both reactively (to those directly impacted by sexual and gender-related sin and struggle) and proactively (to the entire membership of the visible church), the church itself must be committed to a position of sexual faithfulness. At Harvest USA, we call such churches "sexually faithful churches."

What is a Sexually Faithful Church?

The term "sexually faithful church" might sound a bit awkward. It certainly is one I never heard until we came up with it at HARVEST USA a couple of years ago. This term is one that is meant to be a bit abrasive, as it is intended to call

Christians and church leaders to action.

Though the term "sexually faithful church" may be new, it is an ancient, orthodox concept. Here is how we define a sexually faithful church:

A church that disciples its members in a gospel worldview of sexuality through education and redemptive ministry.

What does that definition mean?

Let's briefly explore that definition so you have a better appreciation of where we're going.

A church that disciples... A sexually faithful church is one that intentionally and proactively engages in discipleship. Intentional discipleship is how members grow in the knowledge and fear of the Lord. It is taught and lived out in a way that helps church members apply God's redemptive grace to their lives. Doing so encourages them to grow in their understanding and appreciation of God's design for sex, sexuality, and gender, to resist temptation, and to increase their active ministry among the community of their fellow believers. Through peer and mentor discipleship, they discover practical ways to apply that teaching to their particular lives and situations and to live faithfully as God's covenant people.

...its members... Members at every age level, from young children to seniors, receive age-appropriate teaching about

God's good and wise design for their bodies and desires. They receive biblical, life-changing teaching about proactive accountability and living transparently and interdependently in the Body of Christ. Proactive accountability is a way for friendships to develop where friends are not afraid of sharing their struggles and are willing to ask hard questions when the need arises. A commitment to transparency and honesty is the bedrock of solid, godly relationships.

...in a gospel worldview of sexuality...

We use the word sexuality here as a blanket term to refer to sex, sexuality, and gender. God's people learn that these attributes of created existence and image bearing are theirs precisely because, through

the right exercise and enjoyment of them, we not only honor God, but we reveal his wisdom and glory to each other and the world. In a culture that says we are nothing more than the collection of feelings and desires that drive us, to understand and rest in God's design for sex, sexuality, and gender bestows an uncommon dignity and glory on men and women as God's image bearers and his servant-kings over his creation.

But our modern culture tells us that a gospel worldview of sex, sexuality, and gender is not only wrong but that it is also harmful to human flourishing. We're told that teaching a historic gospel worldview on these issues of human personhood is culturally uninformed, out of touch, insensitive, and unloving. A sexually faithful church educates its members to know how to discern the distortions and falsehoods that increasingly deceive Christians into thinking that to love others means never to challenge their worldviews or their behavior. In other words, the sexually faithful church instructs its members on how to compassionately, patiently, and winsomely speak the truth in love to others.

A Special Call to the Sexually Faithful Church

The call to be proactive in discipling God's people in biblical sexuality must also deal with an issue the Church has not done well with: sexual abuse and the traumatic repercussions that come with it.

First, the church must acknowledge the hiddenness of this sin and work diligently to care for the victims of sexual

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abuse, recognizing the devastating impact abuse has on survivors. The church should compassionately help and support survivors to heal and to flourish spiritually, emotionally, and socially.

issue of the offenders when the abuse is within the congregation. It must not fail to engage the authorities to see that the laws of the state are upheld, in both investigation and prosecution. It must guard the church with policies and procedures that protect against abuse. For offenders, it must enforce protective boundaries around them. Such restrictions are not punitive; they are restorative for everyone.

Second, the church must address the

And third, a sexually faithful church must never shield its leaders from appropriate investigation when allegations are made against them. Careful investigation by those who are not close to the people involved is what is needed to uncover the facts and seek the truth. That will mean getting outside consultation from professionals and a willingness to listen to them and act on their input. Our people need to see this from us. The world needs to see this from us-because one cover-up scandal after another is steadily turning people away from the institution of the Church. How can we persuade people to follow God in this area of sexuality when we misuse it, and then lie about it? (See Ellen Dykas' article in this issue on key steps a church needs to take.)

The History of the Sexually Faithful Church

God commanded his people in the Ten Commandments and elsewhere throughout the Law to be sexually faithful. There are numerous New Testament instructions to be sexually faithful; perhaps the most direct of which is Paul's admonition to "Flee from sexual immorality" in 1 Corinthians 6:18.

But this imperative is more than a bare command. God's people are instructed, throughout the length and breadth of Scripture, to both obey the Law and to do so in the context of transparent community.

That instruction goes back to the beginning of Israel as a covenant community. During the period when God

established the first community of believers under Moses, he made clear the manner through which God's people were to be trained in the knowledge and fear of God and equipped to live faithfully. That manner was twofold: teaching, followed by accountability in community. Let's look at each of them in more detail.

Teaching is commanded to take place in different venues and to different audiences. The Law was to be read publicly to the entire congregation during certain public worship observances (Deuteronomy 31:10-11). Parents were commanded "diligently" to teach the Word of God to their children, in all sorts of settings: "talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise" (Deuteronomy 6:7). Living out the instruction of God's Word, in the most deliberate manner, was to be a way of life in the home.

While the community was to receive the recitation of the Law in public worship and talk about it with their families, they were also commanded to focus on God's revelation during their "quiet time." Psalm 119 was written as a celebration of God's Law as the perfect pattern for life itself. Readers are exhorted to "do as I do," with reference to the writer's words: "I will meditate on your precepts and fix my eyes on your ways" (Psalm 119:15). And, it goes almost without saying, that throughout the Old Testament there are the specific commands forbidding certain sexual behaviors (Leviticus) and the agony God displays in dealing with Israel's adultery (see the Prophets).

In the New Covenant, Paul tells his hearers in Romans 12:2 that covenant believers will be transformed in all respects as their minds are renewed through interacting with God's Word. He says to Timothy in 2 Timothy 3:15-16 that being intimately acquainted with Scripture makes us "wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" and that Scripture makes us "complete [and] equipped for every good work." In a remarkable passage, Paul implores the church at Thessalonica to intentionally live sexually faithful lives based on the instruction "you received from us (in) how you ought to walk and please God (1 Thessalonians 4:1-8).

Whether in the context of the covenant community or the family or alone, God's people are to remember God's Word on a daily basis. We are meant to live it out and be utterly transformed by it. This transformation is not for us alone, merely for individual personal growth. We are messengers of the gospel, and the way we live—and that specifically includes the way we live in and with these bodies God has given to us—is so that we will "shine like lights" in a broken world (see Philippians 2:15). This is the fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham in Genesis 22:18: "and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice."

To the extent that we, Abraham's spiritual offspring, obey the fullness of the revelation from that same Teacher, we shall indeed bless those around us in our families, workplaces, schools, and communities.

A Vision for the 21st Century Sexually Faithful Church

A sexually faithful church educates its members to know how to discern the distortions and falsehoods that increasingly deceive Christians into thinking that to love others means never to challenge their worldviews or their behavior.

To be sure, becoming a sexually faithful church requires a commitment to culture change in our churches. That commitment occurs both at the organizational level (the whole church) and the individual level (the particular believer). It requires a commitment to participate in a lifestyle of discipleship with other believers.

Culture change means teaching God's people what Scripture really teaches about sex, sexuality, and gender—and that God, as wise and loving Designer of human beings, is the only Authority on how these aspects of personhood should be enjoyed. The sexually faithful church must help its members learn how to discern theological truth from distortion and to know how to engage cultural lies with confidence.

Whether it involves compassionate correction or a more robust rebuke, communicating God's will on these issues must always be the truth, spoken in love.

HARVEST USA will launch the Sexually Faithful Church Initiative later in 2019. In the months to come, you'll see more and more resources produced by HARVEST USA to help your church become, increasingly, a sexually faithful church. We realize that educating and equipping the members of your church to become a sexually faithful church is a process. We want to partner with you to help make it a reality—for the glory of God, and a witness to the world.

Tim Geiger is the President of Harvest USA. His passion is to see the Church help sexual strugglers the way Harvest USA helped him when he came to Harvest USA twenty-two years ago. Tim is a Teaching Elder in the PCA and is husband to Susan. They have one child.



CHARACTERISTICS OF A Sexually Faithful Church By Jim Weidenaar

We define a sexually faithful church this way: A church that disciples its members in a gospel worldview of sexuality through education and redemptive ministry. The major

point in this simple but far-reaching statement is this: For a church to teach, lead, model, and assist its people to live faithful lives within God's design for sex, sexuality, and gender, discipleship is the key. Discipleship is a subset of the Great Commission, "making disciples of all nations, teaching them to obey all that I have commended."

This is the mission of the church. Placing sexuality within the context of this mission gives focus and direction to how we address it.

There is another passage that has long been recognized as paradigmatic for the ministry of the church.

"And he gave. . . shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ. . . so that we may no longer be. . . tossed to and fro. . . by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning . . . Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up. . . into Christ, from whom the whole body. . . when each part is working properly. . . builds itself up in love." Ephesians 4:11-16 (ESV)

We see in this description of what faithful ministry looks like a guide, also, to *sexually faithful ministry*. We can identify in these verses four characteristics of a church that is faithfully discipling its members in a gospel worldview of sexuality. Such a church will be biblically grounded, mercifully honest,

humbly led, and ministry minded. Let me briefly describe what we mean by each one.

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by fear and shame.

Biblically Grounded

"... no longer... tossed to and fro... by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning..."

A mom and dad sit in my office, tearfully recounting to me the conversation with their son about his coming out as gay: "Mom, don't you know, Jesus never talked about homosexuality. Besides, the few parts of the Bible that do talk about it are not addressing someone like me, who was born this way." They are confused. They sense that what he is saying is wrong, but don't know what to say or think.

A group of young girls run by me in church. They are singing a song from the latest Disney movie. The chorus urges them to look inside, follow their hearts, and believe in themselves.

What do these scenarios have in common? They illustrate that the world around us is discipling us—especially our kids—all the time. It should not be surprising that we are being "tossed to and fro."

Being biblically grounded means more than settling on the right doctrinal positions. It means giving people the kind of deep and regular teaching that effectively counters the constant barrage of messages they hear in this world. It means biblical teaching on sexuality and gender that does not only focus on "the bad." It means winsomely communicating the Bible's message of the beauty and goodness of sex. It means explaining how God's good design for sex and gender helps us understand him and the gospel.

But also, it involves teaching about sexuality and gender in the context of an entire worldview. It means identifying the misunderstandings, distortions, and even lies being spread in our culture about what the Bible does or doesn't say. The "winds of doctrine" that are tossing our churches blow from a rival world. We need to learn to recognize the worldview foundations of our culture's messages. We need to counter them with the biblical understanding of God, of the nature of reality, of what it means to be human, of what hope we cling to, of what redemption looks like.

be feared. Because of the gospel, there is grace, patience, hope, encouragement, love, strength-all the blessings of union with Christ and communion with his Body, the

So the proclamation of this mercy cannot be lackluster. The mercy of the gospel merits special emphasis because, as fearful sinners, we need assurance that the Savior is for us.

church, are offered to the ones who step into the light through faith. But our nature is averse to faith; we are hesitant to trust the mercy offered to us. So the proclamation of this mercy cannot be lackluster. The mercy of the gospel merits special emphasis because, as fearful sinners, we need assurance that the Savior is for us.

But to "walk in the light," we all need an environment that

is invitingly merciful. People need to know that there is

much more to be gained by coming out of isolation than to

Unfortunately, it is not just our natural fear of exposure that is a challenge here. Some have had experiences in church, or have heard of others' experiences, which confirm their fears-people shunned, shamed, or clumsily disciplined. But often it is not particular incidents that create a church culture of hiding. It is

the unintentional signals that surround every public and private interaction, the social pressure to look good, the emphasis on the external beauty of the public worship, the insistence on the correct doctrine (a good thing, but not the thing), the lack of any visible models of humble confession graciously received, the way "sin" and "sinners" are talked or joked about, the way every discussion or teaching on sex or gender tends toward culture war rather than gospel hope.

A sexually faithful church works to build a culture that is as merciful as Jesus himself. It is his mercy that calls us out of darkness and into the light of the gospel.

Mercifully Honest

"... speaking the truth in love... it builds itself up..."

He was in his early seventies and had come for help in his fight against pornography. Early in our discussions, two things stood out. He had been struggling with this sin for over half a century, and I was the first person he had ever talked to about it. This, even though he had been in the church his whole life, even an officer at times. These kinds of details are significant. We have found stories like his to be very common. The amount of time varies, but the prolonged period of struggle in isolation is typical. A church can give all the right answers from the Bible, and yet have no connection to those in their midst who languish in isolation, paralyzed by fear and shame.

Talking about sex is scary enough—for people and churches. It is scary because it is so personal. Even exploration of the theological meaning of sex makes us uneasy because objective theological talk always hovers at the borders of our subjective, personal story. People's stories are filled with failure, pain, brokenness, and powerful shame.

However, keeping our personal stories hidden in isolation and darkness is the problem that hinders us from grasping the gospel that radically changes our lives. Hiding keeps people struggling with these issues from all the help, encouragement, comfort, and life that is offered by Christ through the means of the fellowship of the saints. That fellowship requires openness and honesty. As John writes, "But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another" (1 John 1:7).

Humbly Led

"He gave. . . shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints. . . "

I've been in many small group studies, Sunday school classes, and other church teaching events. But one stands out to me from all the rest. It was a Sunday school class for men, hitting many of the typical topics you would expect. One thing made this class different. The elders who led it made a clear commitment to lead in humility. None of us saw them make that commitment, but we saw the results.

When it was time to discuss any topic, they took the lead in speaking honestly from the heart, freely admitting personal struggles and failures, acknowledging ongoing battles with sin and temptation, and pointing out areas where they still needed to grow in living out the truths of the gospel. It was

Humility...will move pastors to preach and teach on sexuality not as generals in a culture war, but as shepherds mending a ravaged flock.

clear from the start they were not interested in a race to the right answer. The way they modeled humility transformed that class into a place where men were encouraged to make the gospel real at the front lines of their struggles in daily life.

How these leaders lived was as important as what they taught. Leaders need the gospel like everybody else. Those who preach the gospel must also model gospel repentance and faith in their own lives. This means they don't give the impression that they alone do not need gospel growth when it comes to sexuality. They also need to be honest about the presence of sin in their life, seeking the power of Christ's resurrection to put it to death, and of their need for daily dependence upon God.

For all Christians, this kind of transparency happens in the context of honest and deep friendships of spiritual accountability. But leaders need to seek this kind of fellowship with urgency. The humility this engenders will cause them to deal with sinners (everyone) in their congregation with great gentleness and sympathy. It will move pastors to preach and teach on sexuality not as generals in a culture war but as shepherds mending a ravaged flock.

The Ephesians 4 passage points out that Jesus is the one who gives the church shepherds and teachers. The calling and skills of the leaders are dependent on the gifting of Jesus himself, and that engenders humility. It is a humility that shapes the way shepherds and teachers fulfill their Jesus-given purpose: to equip the saints to fulfill their mission.

Ministry Minded

"... the whole body, joined and held together... when each part is working properly... builds itself up in love."

We have a fireplace in our home that we use often, but I am poorly skilled in the art of fire-starting. Almost invariably, my first try to light the fire catches flame quickly and promisingly. I settle back into a comfy chair to enjoy the warmth and ambiance of the blaze. But a few minutes later, the tongues flicker away into smoke, and I'm looking for more used newspaper and a new match.

Ministry, especially in difficult areas such as sexuality, can be like that. At HARVEST USA we help local churches design and implement ministry to sexual strugglers. I was recently asked, "When these ministries start up, and then flounder, is there a common reason?" My answer? They flounder because one significant leader either moves away from that

church or loses enthusiasm from tiredness or burnout. Lone ranger ministries suffer from instability. The ministry fades like my initial fireplace effort.

Lone ranger ministry is not the vision God gives us in Ephesians 4. There we see ministry that is broad and deep. The pastors and teachers are not the ones *doing* the ministry; they are *equipping* the saints to do it as a "whole body. . . each part working properly." There is variety in this vision for ministry; not everyone is doing the same thing, but every part is active. And issues of sexuality and gender are essential areas of discipleship for every single person.

A sexually faithful church is discipling its people in all of their varied roles and stations: children, innocent and vulnerable; parents, overwhelmed and fearful; young adults, eager and reckless; singles, restless and anxious; marrieds, disappointed and confused; those dominated by sin, desperate and ashamed; those who think they have no sin, complacent and selfish. To minister to all these types of people, it takes an army of different people, "each part working properly." It takes leadership that considers the unique needs of every sub-group, equipping the saints to meet these needs. This is especially so in ministry to those who have deep struggles with sexual sin. This kind of ministry needs a *team*. A church where the work of ministry is spread broadly and deep gains stability and momentum. It "builds itself up." It becomes a fire that is effective and not easily extinguished.

All these characteristics describe what a sexually faithful church is. Is it possible? Absolutely— it's God's design, God's work, as is written in Ephesians 2:10, "We are God's workmanship. . ." We see evidence of God's working in his church. We see more churches than ever asking for help to teach biblically on sexuality and gender. We see more talking about these issues with grace and honesty. We see pastors humbling themselves, leading in repentance. We are getting requests from churches all over the country to train teams to walk alongside those repenting from and affected by sexual sin. What about your church? Are you eager for Christ to build you up into maturity? Are you willing to be a sexually faithful church?

Jim Weidenaar joined the Harvest USA staff in June 2012 as Director for the Greater Pittsburgh Region (GPR). He has a Master's Degree in Theological Studies (MTS) from Calvin Theological Seminary, and a Doctorate in Historical and Theological Studies (PhD) from Westminster Theological Seminary. Jim lives in Pittsburgh with his wife and daughter.

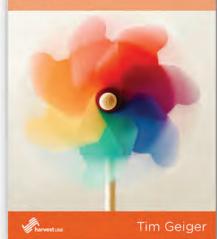
Gospel-Based Responses to Questions on Sexuality

ALVE

GOSPEL SEXUALITY FOR STUDENTS

HARVEST USA

Explaining LGBTQ+ Identity to Your Child



Teach your children to respond to members of the LGBTQ+ community with truth and love.

Spark gospel conversations about sexuality with your students.



Harvest USA | 15-Session Video Curriculum GOD'S DESIGN for SEXUALITY in d CHANGING CULTURE

> Transform your church with a biblical view on sexuality.



It is amazing to think

that Jesus, in His

earthly ministry, would

spend more time

with twelve men

than with the rest of

the world combined.

Where do you begin when someone in your church tells you they struggle with sexual sin of some sort? What is the first thing you say? And after that, what specific help can you give? What if you have never done something like this before?

The answer is not a series of precise to-dos laid out in sequence. It first starts in your view of personal growth and change. And that brings up a much bigger question, the one you must begin with if you, and your church, will effectively help strugglers. It's about discipleship.

How is the Church called to disciple its people? Not in terms of content, but of practice? What does discipleship in the local church actually look like? What should it look like?

It can be difficult for churches to talk about discipleship because a precise definition is often a moving target. Some would say that discipleship encompasses everything that the church does to help people follow Jesus. Others

would say that discipleship is one very specific educational model, counted as one of the many ministries of the church. If we look at the ministry of lesus and the ministry of the early church, one might find that both of those perspectives of discipleship can and should be valued. At the same time, there are some common shortcomings in practice that are often associated with both views.

For those who favor a broad definition of discipleship, it is common (though certainly not universal) that, in practice, discipleship looks like a speaker-to-listener monologue. From Sunday mornings to weekly classes, the primary means of growth is lecture. But while instructing God's people in the

truth of his Word is an essential aspect of discipleship, if we look at Jesus' ministry, we can see that it is not the whole of discipleship.

For those who lean towards a more specific or precise understanding of discipleship-characterizing it as a unique educational model-there can often be a spoken or unspoken two-tiered classification of believers. In this case, there are the "regular" Christians, and there are the "real

> disciples" who are most committed to the to discipling movements that can trend in

> faith. Historically, this perspective has led high-pressure, legalistic directions.

> This paradigm is completely contradictory to the New Testament model. The word Christian is only used three times in the New Testament. The word disciple is used far more often to refer to followers of Jesus. All of his followers are disciples. God's forgiveness in Christ is complete and full of grace. Growth in grace is also just that: gracious. Our Father doesn't

look at his people in two categories: Christian and super-Christian. He looks at his people and sees beloved children.

So then, how do we define discipleship? Is it everything the church does that helps people grow more and more like Christ? Yes! But if we look at the ministry of Jesus, we can flesh that out a bit more. Should Jesus' model and methods of ministry inform what we do as His church? I believe it should.

It is amazing to think that lesus, in His earthly ministry, would spend more time with twelve men than with the rest of the world combined. In fact, the closer he got to the cross, the more time he spent with the twelve and the less time he spent with the crowds. If we're honest, most of us would not consider that to be a top church-growth strategy for today. But this was Jesus' plan for the world to hear the good news of His life, death, resurrection, ascension, reign, and return: a few ordinary, uneducated men who had been with him. This had been Jesus' plan from the beginning of his earthly ministry.

"Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men" is an invitation into relationship and growth with a mission in mind. When Jesus calls the twelve in Mark 3:14, he calls them "so that they might be with him, and he might send them out to preach..." In Jesus' discipling of the twelve, monologue or sermon-style content transfer was not his only means of transformation. At the heart of His discipleship was this "withness" and mission. We see this in Paul's ministry as well in his first letter to the Thessalonians: "So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us (2:8).

There is both content delivery (the gospel) and deep relationship ("withness") at the heart of this discipleship ministry. However we define discipleship, we cannot leave it devoid of personal relationship.

I have the privilege of speaking with pastors each year in the US and abroad who believe that their church is doing well, but there is a missing piece that they just can't put their finger on. They've got good preaching, good classes, and a sometimes great, sometimes frustrating small group structure, but they're not seeing people mature in their faith the way they had hoped. What I've found repeatedly as I listen is that they are longing for an intentional approach to help their people become mature and equipped followers of Christ, and they don't know what that looks like.

We at Life on Life Ministries (a ministry of Perimeter Church) have a working definition for what we call *life-on-life missional discipleship*: laboring in the lives of a few with the intention of imparting one's life, the gospel, and God's Word in such a way as to see them become mature and equipped followers of Christ, committed to doing the same in the lives of others. We believe that discipleship in the context of a group is important because of the need for interdependence within the body of Christ in Christian maturity and because Jesus did his discipling with the Twelve.

Surely, it's not a perfect definition, but it is a helpful one. As we work to build a discipling movement in our church and equip pastors of other churches to help them do the same, we want to focus primarily on what we see in the ministry of Jesus with his twelve men. Certainly, we are not asking anyone to become an itinerant preacher and recruit twelve people to spend all day together every day, but I do believe there are principles from Jesus' life and ministry

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of discipling that we can apply to our context today. And I think the definition of life-on-life missional discipleship captures some of those principles in ways that we can use in the church today.

It could also be helpful to think about lifeon-life missional discipleship in terms of what it is not. It is NOT *life on curriculum* (though a good curriculum is certainly helpful). It is NOT *life on knowledge* (though understanding God's Word is essential). It is NOT *life on programs*. It is NOT *an event*.

So, what might a healthy discipling culture look like in a church? It's one that's rooted from beginning to end in the gospel. The goal of discipleship is not behavior modification; it is to

be conformed into the image of Christ. That happens as we engage with Christ in the gospel day after day (see 2 Corinthians 3:18). As this kind of transformation happens, behaviors do change because the heart is changed. A healthy discipling culture is also built on intentional, accountable relationships that are mutually committed to growth. It also must be built with the mission of the church in mind: to seek and save the lost and to help others grow into Christ-likeness. A healthy movement should be holistic. Any sphere of life is on the table for growth: work, family, sexual struggles, joys, etc. Within relationships that reflect the heart of 1 Thessalonians 2:8, study of the Scriptures, equipping, accountability, prayer, and missional living bear fruit in lives, families, communities, and workplaces.

It starts by investing in just a few people, helping them move towards maturity in all areas of life. This kind of discipling relationship is not a quick fix, it's messy, and it's difficult. If you knew me personally, if you knew my heart, you would easily be able to verify that I am no "super-Christian" exception.

What would it look like, then, to disciple people who are just as messy and difficult as we are? What if their messiness and difficulties look very different from our own? The key to developing intentional accountable relationships is a gospelcentered culture. Performance-based cultures promote

What do you specifically do when someone brings up a sexual sin struggle? You listen.

Your reaction will speak volumes to someone who has just opened up about a struggle—maybe for the first time.

pretense, not vulnerability. And within that environment, there will be no freedom to reveal, share, and confess our sin. No opportunity to ask for help.

So the first step is to create a safe space for people to be transparent in their need both for Jesus and for the support and encouragement of his body. Setting the expectations for the group before it begins meeting is vitally important.

Before I invite someone to join my group, I tell them that I believe honesty and vulnerability are incredibly important for our group. We are not doing this because we've got it all together, we are doing this because we are desperately in need of Jesus and each other to grow more towards maturity. That may be intimidating to hear, which is why I also emphasize that I don't expect this will happen in the first week or month because it takes time



to build trust, and trust will be the foundation of healthy accountability. This is one of the reasons that we have a discipleship covenant that members are asked to pray through and sign before joining the group. The second critical step, in my opinion, is that the leader of the group lead with vulnerability, modeling repentance, and asking for accountability.

With that established, I can circle back to how to help a sexual struggler. What do you specifically do when someone brings up a sexual sin struggle? You listen. Your reaction will speak volumes to someone who has just opened up about a struggle—maybe for the first time. Francis Schaeffer once said in his sermon, The Weakness of God's Servants, "A Bible-believing Christian should have the experience of never being shocked; if we read our Bibles, we should never be shocked." I love that.

From the beginning, this discipleship group has been a place for sinners in need of God's grace for our growth, so when we confess our sins to one another and ask for help, this should be no surprise. I want this person to know two

very important things: that no struggle with sin is beyond the reach of the gospel and we are not going to run away from you because of what you've just shared. You do not have to be a licensed counselor to listen and support someone. Where you go from here varies from situation to situation. You will learn as you go. As a discipleship leader, you are not in a vacuum. Discipleship happens in the context

of community. You are a part of a local and global church that displays a variety of gifts for the building up of one another. Other godly men and women can come alongside that person and equip you as a leader along the way.

All of this will take time, and more importantly, it will take dependence on God to be the one who ultimately does the work of transformation. If you've never had someone invest in you in this way,

that's OK. Look at Jesus. Look at how he invested in those twelve men. See his relationships with them, his compassion and patience, how he challenged their wrong beliefs, how he equipped them, how he sent them out.

How do you start a discipling movement in your church? We have a simple motto that guides all of our training: *Think Big, Start Small, Go Deep.* We long to see the world transformed by people encountering the living God. We want to pray and plan and work hard for the gospel to go to places where it has not yet taken root. Discipleship is about following Jesus and pointing people to Jesus: let's let him be our primary model.

Ryan Brown is the Pastor of Discipleship at Perimter Church and the Atlanta Life on Life Clinic Director. He has been discipling men for over 12 years. Ryan spends most of his time training and coaching leaders at Perimeter and pastors throughout the US and Asia to become lifelong disciple makers. He is a graduate of Georgia Southern University and Covenant Theological Seminary and is a Teaching Elder in the Presbyterian Church of America (PCA). He is married to Marianne, and they have one daughter and, according to his official bio, "the best dog in the world."



A sexually faithful church must take seriously its role to love, embrace, disciple, and include those who struggle with attractions and desires that conflict with Scripture.

Those who live with an enduring pattern of same-sex attraction, and those who feel that their sense of gender is in conflict with their body, struggle deeply with feeling different. In a church culture where marriage and family are placed on a high pedestal, where relationships that move from dating to courtship to engagement to wedding are celebrated,

those with same-sex attraction wrestle with loneliness, isolation, and discouragement. They know and have heard repeatedly that God is opposed to same-sex marriage. They see a future that feels cut off for them.

Upon hearing this, those who do not struggle with same-sex or gender issues may feel tempted toward impatience with their brothers and sisters who do. But I encourage you to resist that temptation, as well as its close relative, the temptation to offer quick solutions.

Feelings of painful loneliness and isolation aren't temporary feelings of distress for those who experience same-sex attraction or gender struggle. They are a present and future reality. They can't be easily dismissed or replaced with positive thinking. These are deep heart-wounds that the Lord calls the Church to help dress, treat, and heal, over a lifetime.

But what does this look like? What are the options for relational and emotional fulfillment for followers of Christ who do not, and may never, experience the joy

of a relationship that leads to marriage? How can the Church become to these brothers and sisters a home, a place of security and comfort where they feel connected to others in the Body of Christ, where their genuine sense of being different will be fully met by the love of Christ, the embrace of brothers and sisters, and a rich life of living for others in the Body?

These questions, and how we answer them, are not inconsequential. They are difficult ones. They are not issues of accommodation or political correctness. They are about what it means to truly be the Body of Christ for every follower of Christ.

I am thankful that in the last several years these questions are being wrestled with by the evangelical church. But while

I have been encouraged by this new-found desire to reach out to and include same-sex attracted and gender-struggling men and women who desire to follow God's design for sexuality, I have also seen three ways these questions are being answered in ways that are not encouraging.

Here are the issues that concern me. I'll categorize them under three headings: **Identity**, **The Body of Christ**, and **The Nature of Change**.

Identity

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There is a significant push to accept a gay identity for those who experience same-sex attraction. A great deal has been written about what this means and doesn't mean, and this article will not have the length to explain the nuanced positions (on both sides). So, I will briefly mention two things that concern me about this contentious issue.

First, while those who advocate for this position insist that using identity language is not saying that sexual orientation is the core part of one's personhood, it nevertheless is a position that echoes the noise from our culture. Our post-Christian culture says that one's sexual identity is the deepest core of personhood, hence the multiplicity of words and letters to describe oneself.

On the one side, the argument is that using the term is, at best, descriptive; it merely describes an enduring pattern of same-sex attraction. But on the other side, the concern I cannot shake is that using self-identifying terminology is

confusing, and it inevitably gets embedded in the culture's understanding of gay or the LGBTQ+ acronym. Again, as used culturally, the language proclaims that one's sexuality is a major, if not the predominant, understanding of human personhood. It is not unreasonable to assume that what is said now as merely descriptive will soon be only understood as a major category of being a Christian (see my comments on the Body of Christ below). That would be a significant

Secondly, the historic, orthodox understanding of sexual desires that are outside of God's design is sin. But some are reshaping this understanding in this direction: Same-sex attraction, acted upon, remains sinful, but as a condition of one's being or identity, it is benign and can be a beneficial way of looking at and experiencing the world.

In this view, the experience of having same-sex attraction enhances one's life, particularly in the realm of non-sexual friendships and community. Instead of being a remnant of indwelling sin, which must in Christ be mastered and overcome, same-sex attraction is like a personality trait to be nurtured and enjoyed.

I've discussed this in my blog post "Gay + Christian" which is on our website. My main point there is that it is inappropriate for a Christian to self-identify according to any pattern of sin or struggle. Paul proclaims this astonishing news: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Corinthians 5:17). The compelling and controlling power of corrupted characteristics, desires, drives, and compulsions (sin) that used to characterize us begin to fall away in our union with Christ. No prior life, or identity, should redefine who we are in Christ, as Christians.

Those who advocate for such terminology need to realize that doing so is not harmless. It is an endeavor charged with meaning, ripe for being continually misunderstood, and one which will encourage those who call themselves "gay" or "queer Christians" to further identify with the broken and sinful characteristics associated with those labels.

No prior life, or identity, should redefine who we are in Christ, as Christians.

As I heard from my seminary professor, there is a good reason to trust two millennia of biblical interpretation on this. Currently, there are passionate debates on whether same-sex attraction apart from same-sex sexual behavior is sin or not. (You can see HARVEST USA's position on same-sex attraction on our website: harvestusa.org > About > Our Beliefs > Same-Sex Attraction.)

This is the issue where the biggest battles are being fought. As believers, and especially as church leaders and pastors, we need to study this carefully, adhering to what Scripture says and not human experience.

The Body of Christ

Identity labeling leads to separation at some level. It distinguishes something foundational or characteristic about the person and others who share that identity form and develop a separate culture.

There is nothing new about doing this. We resonate and connect with others who share histories, events, places from which we've come, struggles, etc. Shared experiences bring us together and overcome our isolation and loneliness.

But it matters a great deal what those shared experiences are and the meaning that is attached to them.

Another term I am hearing is "sexual minorities." Here we find another term being promoted that is embedded in the language of our culture: "minorities," people described by their marginal status within the larger power structures of the majority.

Developing a separate subculture within the Church undermines its unity.

One of Christ's chief desires is that we would be dynamically united to him and one another. We are to be "members [of the Body] one of another" (Ephesians 4:25), joined together by and through the power of Christ, so that we might build up the entire Body to become increasingly like Christ, for the glory of God (4:15-16). Creating a category of believers within the

Church through advocating for a separate subculture (queer or otherwise) detracts from that course.

What value is there to a Christian identifying as a sexual minority? How does that help him or her? How does it enhance the integrity and unity of the Church? How does it honor Christ? How does it help Christians who struggle with sexual or gender-related sin to walk in repentance? I can't see the benefit, though I do understand the rationale.

And it's this: Brothers and sisters who experience samesex attraction or struggle with their sense of gender have often been misunderstood and mistreated. The Church has often not been a place of hope and healing for them.

But the answer is not to create a separate queer culture, where Christians who identify as LGBTQ+ can flourish. Christ calls the Church to unity, so this becomes an opportunity for the Church to repent and be increasingly sensitive and compassionate to those who have been wounded by the power and effects of sin—and even hurt by the Church.

Churches must find ways to cultivate and provide appropriate, godly relational intimacy for people who might never be married. We must find ways to value singleness as a calling (as Paul does in 1 Corinthians 7), and include unmarried Christians in the full life of the Church. And, we must resist the longstanding temptation to name same-sex and gender-related sin patterns as worse than other patterns of sin. Our same-sex and gender-struggling brothers and sisters are sinners in need of the same grace as anyone else.

Loving fellow brothers and sisters who live with same-sex attraction and gender struggles will mean taking the time to hear their stories, their experiences, and the fears they have as they navigate a church culture that has not always embraced them.

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The Nature of Change

One side effect is that such labels tend to stick. It is a lie of the world to believe that same-sex attraction or gender dysphoria is innate and unchangeable. I am not for a moment stating that complete change in desires or attraction always happens. That belief has hurt many. But change can happen. It's a process completely under the sovereign purview of God.

Through taking on a "gay Christian" identity and retreating into a gueer subculture, one is immersed in an environment

where such change in affections might be discounted or rejected altogether. The camaraderie and connectedness that occurs within the isolation of the subculture can become life-giving. The pursuit of holiness and repentance can be abandoned in favor of relational comfort and companionship.

Now, the experience and feelings of same-sex attraction and gender dysphoria are not unusual, particularly among adolescents and young adults. For example, one study shows that as many as 10.7% of adolescents are unsure of their sexual orientation. However, most of these individuals have not adopted a gay or lesbian identity upon entry into adulthood. The reason? They realized

as they exited their teen years that they were not primarily sexually attracted to others of their own gender. In other words, they concluded that their experiences of such desires were not determinative.

Here's the problem in using such labels: The Church will find itself aligned with the culture's mantra that personal experiences and desires are identifying and determinative (core identities), even when experienced when one is young and still in the process of forming one's identity and view of life. What hope will we give to young Christians who experience non-heteronormative feelings and desires? They will logically conclude that this is how God made me. Under this mistaken thinking, there's no need for redemption, no need for change, no need for repentance.

The Church must always hold out the possibility of change for all people wrestling with all sorts of sin patterns. One can't encounter the living God without being transformed. The transformation begins in the heart and will inevitably lead to behavioral change. It may not be everything a struggling believer may hope for, but it will be a level of change that increasingly glorifies God and shapes that person into who God calls him to be.

For each Christian wrestling with same-sex attraction or gender struggles, that transformation will look different. At a minimum, it will include this perspective: that to embrace a gay or transgender identity, and the enticements that come with it, is antithetical to the new creation that person has become in Christ. If the Church communicates that

> every aspect of the believer's life, then it mishandles God's Word and misleads God's people.

> there is not a need for sanctification in

Where do we go from here? Church must to redemptively engage Christians who self-identify as LGBTQ+. The biblical paradigm for such engagement is speaking the truth in love. This is the process that Paul describes in Ephesians 4:11-16, a process in which various members of the Church play a role. It is a gracious process, rooted in the strength of authentic friendship, where loving assistance goes sideby-side with loving confrontation. This is how we "grow up in every way

into him who is the head, into Christ..." (Ephesians 4:15).

Loving fellow brothers and sisters who live with same-sex attraction and gender struggles will mean taking the time to hear their stories, their experiences, and the fears they have as they navigate a church culture that has not always embraced them. It involves the Church becoming a place of true refuge and help for them, as they grow (alongside the rest of us) into the places the Lord has made for them in his Body.

Tim Geiger is the President of Harvest USA. Tim is a Teaching Elder in the PCA and is husband to Susan and father to one daughter, all who believe they have the "world's best dog."

i Remafedi, G., Resnick, M., Blum, R. and Harris, L., Demography of Sexual Orientation in Adolescents. Pediatrics, 89 (4), 714-721 (1992).

ii The term "most" applies to Generation X. In contrast to the Millennial generation, of whom 7.3% self-identify as non-heterosexual, that number is significantly lower (2.4%) for prior generations (year of birth 1980 and before).



ON THE MILLENNIAL iGen FRONT LINES

By Matt Cohen

In March of 2012, my wife and I, along with a group of dear friends, planted Citylight Church in Philadelphia. I was 26 years old and well over the average age among the early members of the church. By God's grace, Citylight and I have aged, but we are still very young. As a result, the elders of Citylight Church have had the privilege and challenge of reaching, and then shepherding, a flock full of millennials and iGens toward sexual fidelity when that demographic increasingly embraces unbiblical positions on sex, sexuality, marriage, pornography, and gender. Throughout the journey, one passage of Scripture that has been particularly formative for us is Colossians 1:28-29 (ESV):

Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.

In this rich passage, we have found three guiding principles for making disciples among generations steeped in sexual confusion and brokenness. Proclaim. Warn and Teach. Remember Your Goal and Your Energy.

Proclaim Jesus

The very best way to help young people honor Jesus with their sexuality is by proclaiming to them all that Jesus is and all that Jesus does. We've watched something stunning happen over the years at Citylight as we tirelessly proclaim Jesus Christ as the eternal Son who was with the Father in the beginning, as the One through whom and for whom everything was made, as the Word that became flesh and dwelt among us, as the perfect high priest who has brought us to God through his shed blood, as the resurrected Lord who secures our new birth, as the One who is with us always by the indwelling Holy Spirit, as the King who invites us into a kingdom larger than our own, and as the Savior who will return to deliver us from the wrath to come.

We've seen people become increasingly captivated by Jesus and decreasingly captivated by unbiblical sexual beliefs and practices. Many of the millennials I know (myself included) are worn out by their narcissism. We are hungry for a King whose Kingdom isn't a celebration of us. As we proclaim the wonder of Jesus' person and work, over time, we've seen countless young people turn from the idol of sex to serve "the living and true God" (1 Thessalonians 1:9).

Never stop proclaiming Jesus.

Warn and Teach

Teaching is the orderly presentation of Christian truth for converts so that they may know how to growⁱ. Since we want



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to present everyone in Citylight Church mature in Christ, we have to explicitly connect the proclamation of Jesus to the details of people's lives, and that happens through warning and teaching. Gone are the days when people naturally connect the message of the gospel to its implications for sexuality. We have to warn and teach so that gospel proclamation leads to specific gospel application.

When it comes to teaching, one of the very best ways to connect the gospel to issues of sexuality is to preach through books of the Bible when the church gathers. This practice ensures that we will talk a lot about sexual issues because the Bible talks a lot about sexual issues.

Other ways that we teach our church to connect the gospel to its sexual implications are through membership classes, our member covenant, through our small group leader trainings, through our weekly small groups that discuss the book of the Bible we are learning from on Sundays, and by encouraging and resourcing a culture of one-to-one discipleship where we help apply the gospel to the details of one another's lives.

Warning in Scripture refers to confronting with the intent of changing one's attitudes and actions. Warning is critical for maturity. In Proverbs, Solomon warns his maturing son that though sexual sin looks fabulous, he needs to know that "the dead are there" (Proverbs 9:18). Solomon warns his son by helping him consider where sexual sin will lead. At Citylight, we try to encourage a culture of love and courage that makes warning possible. Love desires the best for the other, and courage is willing to get in the way of someone

walking toward destruction.

Most millennials have been discipled by the culture into a "live and let live" mindset when it comes to sexual expression. The result is that warning often feels like hate, rather than love. However, we have to keep Jesus' interaction with the rich young man in mind (Mark 10:17-22). Verse 21 says that Jesus looked at the rich young man and *loved* him. Jesus then proceeded to tell the young man something he would have hated to hear: *sell all that you have*. Jesus, love incarnate, teaches us that love sometimes warns and says things that the beloved might hate to hear for the sake of their good (See also Acts 20:20).

I have one very practical encouragement to pastors and leaders when it comes to teaching and warning others: equip the saints for the work of ministry (Ephesians 4:12). Teaching and warning one another to apply the gospel to issues of sexuality requires a level of closeness that a leader can only have with so many people. Therefore, the Christian leader should make it their goal to equip the saints to teach and warn one another (Romans 15:14). There is no perfect structure for equipping the saints to teach and warn one another (classes, training, leader development, online courses, etc.). Simply pick one, start equipping your people, and adjust the structure as needed.

Equipping the saints to minister to one another's sexual struggles is aided significantly by a culture of family in the church. The two best ways I know to create a culture of family in the church are to talk about the church as a family constantly and have the leaders go first in modeling



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I am overjoyed to tell you that God is powerfully at work in churches throughout our region that are reaching scores of young people and maintaining biblical fidelity in the area of gender and sexuality.

transparency about their sexual struggles with a few trusted church members who can, in turn, do the same with other church members.

Remember Your Goal and Your Energy

Finally, keep your goal in mind as you minister to this confused generation. On this side of eternity, the results of proclaiming, warning, and teaching will always be a mixed bag. As a result, discouragement will always be nipping at your heels as you seek to lead people (young or old) toward sexual fidelity. As someone who is easily prone toward discouragement, I have to press into the goal of and energy

behind my shepherding. My goal is to present everyone mature in Christ. My ministry isn't about me; it's about Christ. Why should I be discouraged?

My energy is the powerful working of God. Prayer kills discouragement and leads us into dependence on God who is powerful. I am overjoyed to tell you that God is powerfully at work in churches throughout our region that are reaching scores of young people and maintaining biblical fidelity in the area of gender and sexuality. Rest assured, you do not need to compromise Scripture's clear teaching on human sexuality to reach people or build the church. Jesus will build his church. That's his promise. Our privilege is to toil and struggle for our people with all his energy that he powerfully works within us!

Matt is a California native who has come to love Pennsylvania. Matt is a graduate of Penn State (Philosophy) and Southern Seminary (MDiv). A former collegiate gymnast, he now prefers being outside running and hiking with his wife, Andrea, and children Soren and Sage. As the Lead Pastor, Matt guides the overall vision of the church, develops other leaders, and is the primary preacher at Citylight Manayunk.

i The New American Commentary, *Philippians, Colossians, & Philemon* by Richard Melick |r.





Harvest USA is committed to helping churches disciple men and women dealing with life-dominating sexual struggles and sin. Theo and Brittany, who now run a ministry out of their church, one that Harvest USA helped start, give testimony to the power of the Body of Christ in shaping faith and lives.

Theo: It started in college during freshman orientation. Brittany and I met during a pivotal season in our lives. Brittany's mom had passed away that fall, and I was facing the reality that I struggled with same-sex attraction. When we met, we sensed that there was a connection, but thought we would just be friends forever—nothing more. We clung to each other that first semester, becoming fast friends—sharing our backgrounds, secrets, wishes, and dreams. Brittany provided comfort to me at a time when I needed it.

Brittany: Throughout most of college, Theo and I went our separate ways. I buried myself in my schoolwork. I was an art major, and it was demanding enough to justify escaping from my grief. Losing my mom was something I ran from, and college came at the perfect time. Theo dove head first into the athlete world—morning weights, long practices, and parties all week.

Theo: When we graduated, we both moved to Charlotte, NC. Over the next year, we both hit rock bottom. Brittany was in a godless

relationship, making poor decisions, and planning a future that didn't fit with what she believed. I was drowning myself in the party scene, looking for validation, acceptance, and whatever made me feel "masculine." I was desperate to escape my developing attraction to other men, sporadically giving into these desires.

Brittany: I just signed a lease with my boyfriend to move into an apartment the following weekend. My mom's best friend lived in Charlotte and was like a second mother to me. She got wind of my plans and confronted me in a way no one else could. She spoke as a mother, a friend, and a believer in Christ. Her boldness gave me the courage to take my first step in trusting the Lord, deciding to not live with my boyfriend. Throughout the next year, with the help of my new small group leaders at church, I felt convicted to walk away from this relationship. I saw the contrast in who God was asking me to be and who I had become.

Theo: The Lord intervened in my life by watching Brittany and her involvement in church. I saw her trusting the Lord. I felt a pull to the church—like it could be an answer to my struggle with sexual sin. The only Christian I knew in Charlotte was Brittany, so I reached out to her to ask about finding a small group.

She pointed me to a men's group. I didn't know a soul at the church, but within a year, some of these guys became my first genuine, healthy male friendships. Later that year, we went on

a retreat. A friend asked some hard questions that enabled me to share my struggles with same-sex attraction, as well as my patterns of pornography and hook-ups associated with these sinful desires. That weekend, I felt the Holy Spirit push me to tell the other guys on the retreat. This was my first act of obedience and was the start of my healing.

Following the retreat, the guys in the group pursued me, asking questions and praying for me. It was the first time that I truly felt like I had a church family who was not afraid to enter the mess of my life and help me out of it, pointing me to Christ. The pastor of our community regularly met with me—he never made me feel ashamed but encouraged me and prayed for me. Coming into the light was critical for my walk with God to grow.

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a soul at the church,
but within a year,
some of these guys
became my first
genuine, healthy
male friendships.

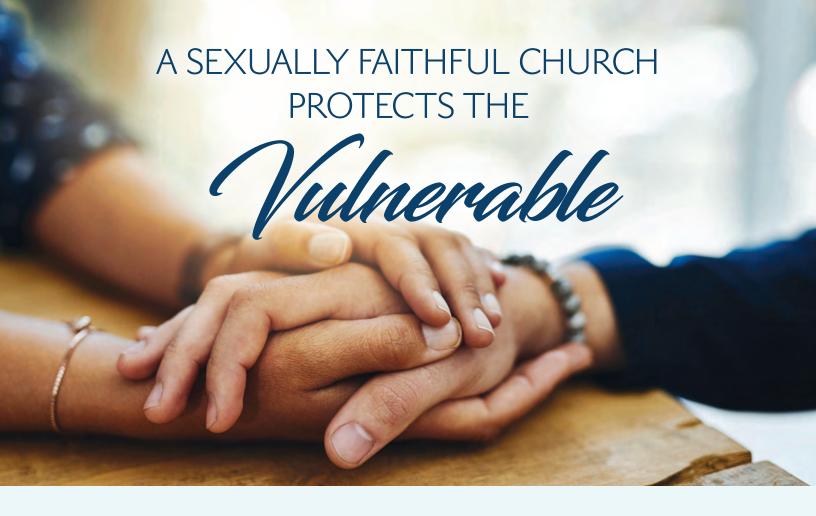
Brittany: My friendship with Theo grew stronger and more intimate. We shared our discovery of God and our excitement for the church. People told us frequently that we would be good together, but we were just friends. Best friends. I heard the expression once, "As you run the race toward heaven and continue to pursue holiness in the Lord, look to your left and right and see who is running beside of you." We were always beside each other, finding new ways to get involved, to serve, to gather our community. Eventually, Theo started to see me as more than a friend,

but I was oblivious. Yet my love for him was growing.

Theo: When I realized I wanted to pursue Brittany as more than a friend, I was terrified of her rejection. After all, what woman would marry a man who admits to having an attraction to other men? It felt like a disease—and I wasn't "healed" yet. I finally told her about the work God had been doing in my life. I confessed my sexual sin to her. Brittany told me later that this was the moment she fell in love with me. Six months later, we started dating, and soon after, we would be two of the grass-root leaders of the Set Free Ministry at our church, dedicated to walking alongside men and women who come out of the shadows of sexual sin in search of the healing power of the Gospel.

Set Free Ministry was launched with the help of HARVEST USA in 2015 as a ministry of Christ Covenant Church in Charlotte, NC. The leadership team consists of ten leaders who shepherd men, women, wives, and parents of those who are struggling. Were it not for the men, women, and pastors who pursued us, two young wanderers, we may have never found the church, the Lord, or each other. Our God orchestrates his timing over everything, and it's always perfect. Praise the Lord for his handiwork and the, sometimes messy, pursuit of his children!

Theo and Brittany live in North Carolina and have a 1½-year-old daughter and a 2-year-old foster son. Theo works in sales, and Brittany is a part-time graphic designer and a full-time mom. They spend their free time at the park with their kids, wedding hopping, and visiting friends and family near and far.



A heartbreaking twenty-year regret. I saw something and hesitated. A summer's day walk through a park led me by a parked car. A glance gave me a brief view inside the car to notice a man and what looked like a young child. Something felt off; when the man looked over, and we locked eyes, I froze internally but kept walking. I hadn't seen any *obvious* wrongdoing, but his face and a subtle alarm going off in my heart rattled me. Scared and confused, I rushed to the neighborhood police station and reported what I'd seen and was told a car would be sent out.

A twenty-year regret that I did not approach that car leads me to pray occasionally for the now-adult-child, just in case a vulnerable child was hurt that day.

A disturbing fact that should motivate Christians toward vigilant, courageous action is that sexual misconduct and abuse of power happens even among us. To us. By us. It's not only those "out there," like the child in the car, who need protection, but all those who are vulnerable within the church.

Four Steps Churches Must Take

This is a deeply troubling, potentially overwhelming topic, so consider the following four steps as your church's starting

point for being a sexually faithful church. At the end of this article are a few resources to further guide your church.

ACKNOWLEDGE

Acknowledge that the horror of sexual abuse has happened to many people in your congregation, and they come into the Body of Christ with deep scars and wounds. See them; they are there. Your ministry needs to take their stories into account as you pastor because trauma does not disappear into the past. Those with abuse histories are especially vulnerable to being abused again.

Acknowledge, also, that abuse can happen in your church, particularly by those in leadership. It's terrible, but true, that sexual predators target faith communities. Why? Christians are often naive, quick to trust, ignorant of this problem, and churches generally offer easy access to children. Abusers find the church to be a refuge for their evil deeds.

The abuse scandals that have rocked churches share a common thread: the abused were not listened to. Disbelief and cover-up became the way many churches dealt with the allegations. Rather than pursue truth and protect and care for the wounded, leaders covered for their friends, colleagues, for the reputation of their ministry and church.

The result: Broken and bruised children and teens (adults, too) weren't believed. Lives were further traumatized; the faith of many failed.

Humanity is so utterly devastated by appalling sin that we need radical intervention through Christ. On behalf of the vulnerable, it is God himself who calls leaders to see the broken and respond to them.

"Then they also will answer, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?' Then he will answer them, saying, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me'" (Matthew 25:44-45).

Refusing to acknowledge and deal with these kinds of sins is to commit a graver one: turning away from Christ himself who identifies with the oppressed and weak.

LEARN

Learn what you need to do to protect your flock. This task may seem overwhelming, but thankfully there are a growing number of trustworthy resources like *Godly Response to Abuse in the Christian Environment* (GRACE) which provide education and training on subjects like:

- How to develop a comprehensive plan for your church regarding the vetting of anyone who has a role of responsibility for the vulnerable.
- How to recognize the signs of child sexual abuse.
- How to recognize the typical profiles of pedophiles. Most pedophiles know their victims and are winsome, skilled deceivers who can present in church settings as charming, dedicated Christians.
- How to conduct an effective investigation of accusations of abuse, particularly if the accused is a pastor, staff member, or lay leader.
- How to develop policies, communicated and agreed upon by all leaders and staff, to refuse to hide or cover-up any allegations, and hold one another accountable to follow through.

But do more than study policies and procedures. Read stories from those who are survivors of sexual abuse. Talk with those who are willing to share their stories. These first-hand stories flesh out in powerful ways how abuse can happen, what its devastating impact is, and how the church can effectively protect and respond.

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PROVIDE COMPASSIONATE CARE

It goes without saying that this is vital for those who have been abused. So gather resources that provide a list of experienced and spiritually mature people, men and women in your congregation who can come alongside those who have been hurt, and professional counselors who are experienced in counseling trauma and abuse victims and for their families who are also profoundly impacted.

Care is needed for the abusers, also. God's grace goes the full distance to forgive all sin, and to provide healing through his Spirit, including the hearts of abusers. But offenders also need protection from themselves. A compassionate approach to abuse means that the abuser must submit to boundaries, guidelines, and oversight, and any refusal to do so will mean discipline and even expulsion from the church.

LEAN ON JESUS

Finally, to protect the vulnerable, sexually faithful churches need to depend on Jesus to do this. I close with this because, after considering the first three steps, no one can doubt that this kind of ministry is beyond anyone's ability. We cannot lament what is horrific, confront sins such as deceit, malice, abuse, betrayal, and pride, care for children and adults who have been devastated by the selfishness of others, and deal with abusers from our personal and feeble reserves of wisdom and love. We need radical wisdom and strength from outside of ourselves; we need a Savior and Redeemer, and we have one in Jesus.

"The Lord is a refuge for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble." We cannot be satisfied with saying these words; we must live them out as ones who are called to reflect him.

RESOURCES

"Recommendations for Churches Dealing With Abuse," Diane Langberg. http://www.dianelangberg.com/2019/02/recommendations-for-churches-dealing-with-abuse/ (accessed 25 March 2019).

Godly Response to Abuse in a Christian Environment (GRACE) (https://www.netgrace.org/) is an excellent resource for churches.

Deepak Reju, Onguard: Preventing and Responding to Child Abuse at Church (New Growth Press), 2014.

Ellen Dykas is the Women's Ministry Coordinator at Harvest USA. Ellen's passion is coming alongside women in their spiritual journeys.

GRACE, "Five Characteristics of Child Sexual Offenders in Faith Communities," https://www.netgrace.org/resources/five-characteristics-of-child-sexual-offenders?rq=five%20characteristics%20 (accessed 10 May 2019).



By Tim Geiger

The date: Friday, October 24, 1997. It was a sunny, mild day in Philadelphia. I remember staring at my telephone, holding the church bulletin in my hand. My pulse raced. My breathing was quick and shallow. I knew what I had to do—but so many times before, I got to this point and rationalized why I shouldn't go through with it. I needed to call Harvest USA. I needed to tell someone, for the first time in my life, that I struggled with same-sex attraction. I didn't want to live life as a gay man.

The call was answered personally (as they are today) and an appointment with a staff member was set for the next business day (though today, the wait for an appointment might be a bit longer). When I saw him, he challenged me with this observation: "Your biggest problem isn't homosexuality. It's idolatry." So began a journey of faith, growth, and repentance that continues to this day.

Only one staff member from 1997 is still around today. So much has changed in the last twenty-two years! Our location

(two moves since then), our staff (more than doubled), our budget (quadrupled), and our logo (changed and colorized). About 90% of the people we ministered to in 1997 were men; today, it's closer to 70%. Back then, nearly all our time went toward helping people in our office (what we call Direct Ministry). Over the intervening years, we've also discerned the call to equip the Church to minister to people affected by sexual brokenness. We've become a national organization.

In 2018, we reached more people than ever before: we helped 894 individuals and families in our offices through our Direct Ministry programs (a 3% increase over the prior year). And, we engaged over 63,000 people last year through our educational and equipping ministry. We estimate that to be a 15% increase over 2017.

Though much has changed at HARVEST USA, a lot has stayed the same. We remain committed to discipleship as our sole ministry objective. When someone comes to us for help with a sexual or gender-related struggle, we don't focus on behavior change. Just as I was challenged two decades ago that idolatry (the Bible's term to explain out of control desires of the heart) was my most significant issue, so we challenge men and women today. Walking in faith and repentance (those two realities can't be separated) depends on growing in love with the Lord Jesus Christ. As our hearts warm toward him and his covenant love, his Spirit is the One who gives us grace to live differently.

The culture has certainly changed since 1997. Many today view the Bible as outdated, irrelevant, and unsophisticated regarding sex, sexuality, and gender. So much of the current philosophies that underlie how our culture views human sexuality are borne of selfishness and out of a materialistic worldview. Many see sex as nothing more than a biological urge for pleasure. The new understanding of gender says that gender is malleable, that we are all on a gender spectrum, and it is up to the individual to decide their own gender, based on their feelings.

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Sadly, more and more people in the Church are adopting these worldly philosophies about issues that Scripture addresses clearly. Many Christians who favor these worldviews are under the age of forty. Statistically, Millennials as a group see nothing unbiblical about LGBTQ+ identity and behavior. And our youngest generation, Generation Z (young people up through college age) has the highest levels of acceptance of these secular values.

We see this in the requests for help we constantly receive. Youth leaders asking for help because a member of their youth group has declared themselves to be transgender or someone has self-identified as gay. The challenge for these youth leaders is how to respond in ways that speak the truth in love to their younger brothers and sisters in the faith.

That's one of the key questions HARVEST USA is answering now, and it's one of the critical areas where our ministry will grow in the months and years to come.

Where do we believe the Lord is leading Harvest USA? What do we anticipate ministry in 2020 and beyond will look like?

- 1. We'll remain firmly grounded in Scripture. While the broader Christian culture may tinker with Scripture to make it fit its agenda, HARVEST USA will remain firmly committed to the unchanging, inerrant authority of Scripture and what it says about God's design for sex, sexuality, and gender.
- 2. We'll be ministering to more people. The number of people we minister to in our offices will stay about the same as last year. But through using technology to do Direct Ministry (adding online biblical support groups as an adjunct to our live, in-person groups), and growing the number of our Partner Ministries in churches, we anticipate a 15% increase in the number of people helped each year for the next five years. By 2024, we want to be helping 2,000 people annually both through Direct Ministry in our offices and our Partner Ministries in local churches.

3. We'll be teaching more people to understand and live out biblical concepts of sex, sexuality, and gender. We don't plan to do more teaching events in the coming years, but we do expect to equip more people. You've read about Harvest USA's Sexually Faithful Church Initiative in this issue of *harvestusa magazine*. We want to see 50 churches become sexually faithful churches by the end of 2020, and then add another 50 per year in 2021 and beyond. Sexually faithful churches will talk with their members at all

age levels about biblical concepts of sex, sexuality, and gender. Through discipleship, proactive accountability, and transparency in community—equipping tools we'll help churches develop and grow—these churches will help their members better resist sexual temptation and sin, grow in their delight to follow Christ in this area of life, and steer clear of the type of temptations that turn into life-dominating sin patterns.

4. We'll be equipping more churches to help those affected by sexual and gender-related struggle and sin. We want sexually faithful churches to provide ministry to their members who are affected by different types of sexual and gender-related sin.

This includes those who struggle, as well as family members (parents and spouses) impacted by those struggles. Part of our commitment to equip churches to do that is producing a new line of curricula to help in those discipleship relationships. We'll be self-publishing curricula for men, women, wives, and parents. These resources are ideal for a one-on-one discipleship relationship or a small group setting. The first in this new line of curricula will be available through HARVEST USA by July 1 and more will be released periodically throughout the next two years.

5. We'll help more churches start Partner Ministries. Partner Ministries are ministries run by local churches, which Harvest USA helps them start, and we support them as they do their work. Partner Ministries help gender and sexual strugglers to walk in increasing faith and repentance. But they also help family members learn how to maintain an ongoing relationship with their loved ones who struggle without compromising truth. Since 2010, we've been slowly growing a network of Partner Ministries around the country. We want to add three new Partner Ministries each year, and this year we'll be implementing new ways to support the leaders of those ministries.

6. We'll produce more resources for the Church and individuals. We plan to publish more print, video, and electronic resources that God's people can access to learn more about specific issues and how to help people struggling with them. That means more articles, blog posts, and short videos like you're used to seeing in *harvestusa magazine* and on harvestusa.org. And, we'll create many more resources to be accessed through our website.

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7. We're committed to expanding our use of technology-based learning. Almost since its inception, Harvest USA's equipping ministry has consisted mostly of live, in-person equipping events in churches and other venues. While we're not ending this part of our equipping ministry, we've found that sometimes the travel, cost, and staff time for live teaching events isn't the wisest or most effective way to equip people and churches. In 2018, we began to transfer some of our presentations to either recorded video or webinarbased formats. We believe that using technology will allow us to equip more people around the world and do so at a lower cost.

8. We'll become an international ministry. Through the use of technology to conduct our equipping ministry and disseminate our resources, we anticipate that more people not only in the United States but around the world will benefit from the ministry work we do.

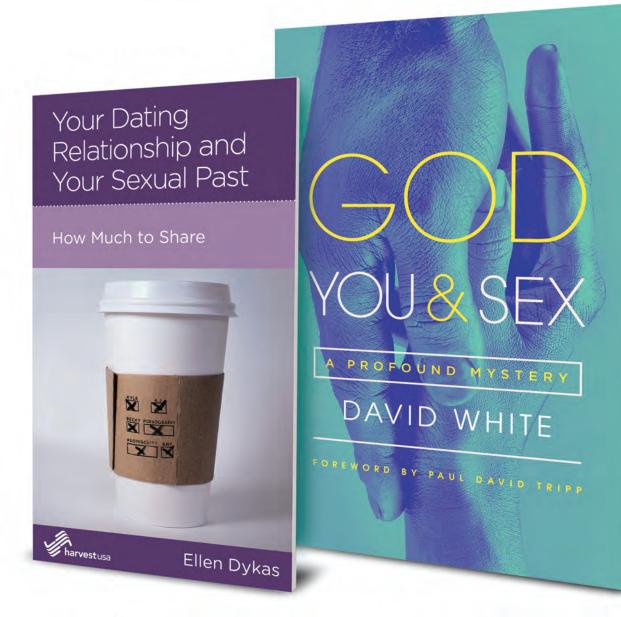
I'm excited about the ministry of Harvest USA in the years to come. Please pray that the Lord would keep us faithful to Scripture and that he would use the ongoing and growing ministry of Harvest USA to equip his Church to disciple his people biblically, powerfully, and compassionately. We want to help make the Church the increasingly holy, faithful witness she is meant to be in a world that needs to hear—and see—the Gospel at work.

Tim Geiger first came to HARVEST USA as a ministry recipient. He eventually joined HARVEST USA as a Men's Ministry staff member, became the Director of the Greater Pittsburgh Regional office in 2007, and returned to Philadelphia in 2012 as the Executive Director and is now President of HARVEST USA.



Resources on Biblical Sexuality





Wisdom for honest conversations before you get engaged.

Learn how sexuality points to God's love for you.

