

SEXUALITY & THE CHURCH IN AMERICA

II

HOW ARE CHURCHES
CREATING A
CONGREGATIONAL CULTURE
OF SEXUAL INTEGRITY?



Introduction

The first report in our *Sexuality & the Church in America* series explored how pastors were responding to the sexual challenges they encountered in their congregations. Our second report examines the specific actions pastors and churches are taking to create a culture of sexual integrity within their worshiping community.

To determine this, we asked more than 400 Senior Protestant pastors a series of questions about what they were teaching on sexual issues at their churches, as well as questions about office policies, staff care, professional training, and pastoral self-care.

Our research reveals that while most pastors believe it is extremely important for Christians to have a comprehensive biblical understanding of God's design for sexuality, few churches are highly intentional in guiding their members into such an understanding. Further, most churches have yet to develop a systematic approach to promoting sexual integrity through reasonable office policies and intentional staff care. The research reveals a number of practical actions churches can take to strengthen their commitment to creating a culture of sexual integrity.

The Brushfires Foundation
TrueNorth Freedom Project
Covenant Eyes

American Family Association
Be Broken Ministries
California Family Council
Changing Lanes Ministries
Concordia Publishing House
Delaware Strong Families
Enough is Enough
Family Institute of
Connecticut
Focus on the Family
Hawaii Family Forum
Josh McDowell Ministries
Love and Truth Network
Louisiana Family Forum
Massachusetts Family
Institute
Nathan Project
New Yorker's Family
Research Foundation
Regeneration Ministries
Restored Hope Network
The Family Foundation
The Family Policy Council of
West Virginia
Wisconsin Family Action
Wisconsin Family Council

Sexuality & the Church in America is a collaborative research project led by The Brushfires Foundation and TrueNorth Freedom Project, along with Covenant Eyes and 22 other organizations dedicated to serving individuals in need, strengthening families, equipping churches to share the truth about sexuality with love, and proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the culture.

Learn more at:
brushfiresfoundation.org/integrity

Research highlights

Congregational teaching on sexual issues

1. A strong majority of pastors (72%) believe it is “extremely important” for Christians to have a “comprehensive biblical understanding of God’s design for sexuality and relationships.”

Another 20 percent believe this is “very important.”

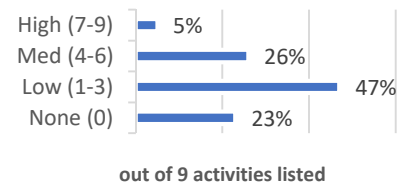
Fewer pastors, but still a strong majority (59%), also feel it is “extremely important” for Christians to share this understanding of sexuality with their family members and friends. Another 30 percent feel this is “very important.”

2. Further, half of pastors (48%) indicate they have no reservations about addressing “matters of sexuality in formal teaching or public preaching situations.”

Of those expressing some hesitation, 22% feel such topics “wouldn’t be appropriate for some in the congregation to hear.” Others feel the subject matter is too sensitive for the congregation (15%) or that sexual topics are low on their list of teaching priorities (14%). One in ten (10%) shared that they didn’t know enough to speak well on sexual matters.

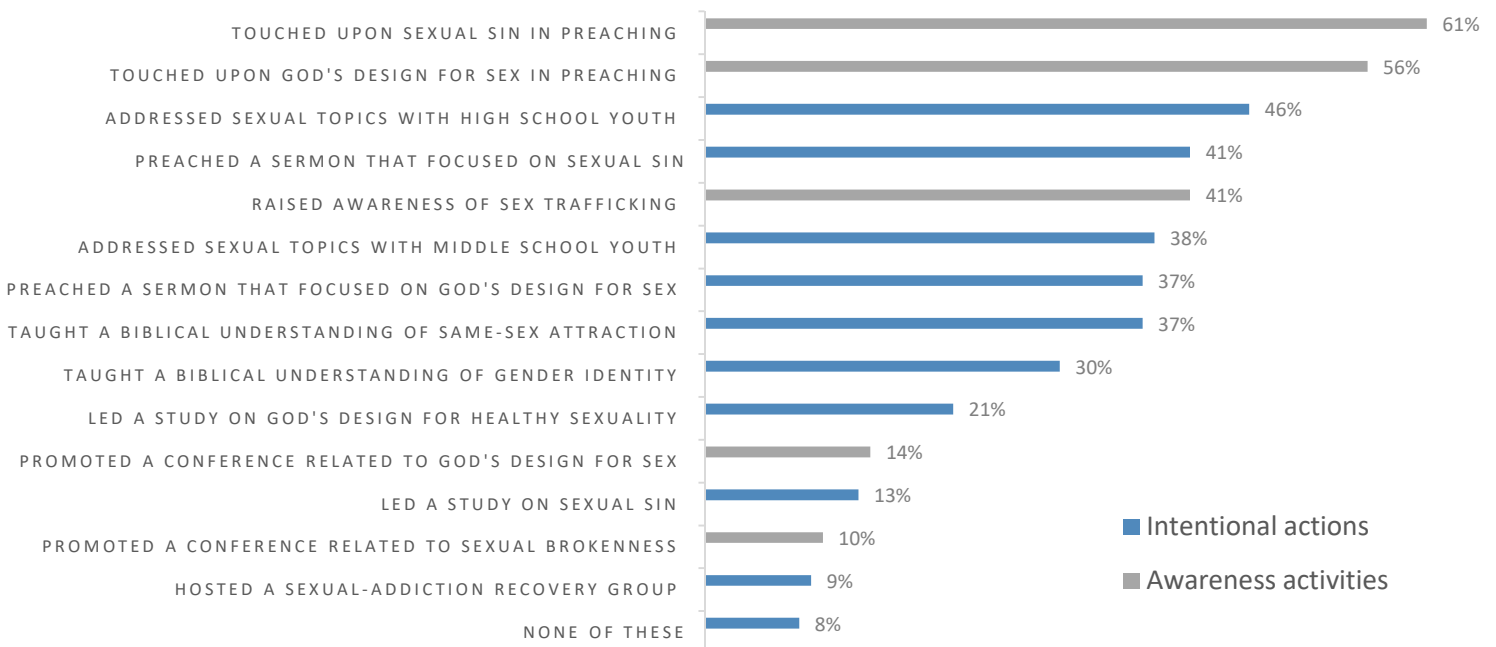
3. Yet, seven in ten pastors admitted that their church had done little or nothing to promote a biblical understanding of sex over the previous year. Just 5 percent of churches were highly intentional at teaching about sexual issues.

of intentional actions taken in the previous year to promote a biblical understanding of sexuality



4. When asked about the specific actions they had taken in the previous year, fewer than half of pastors had done 12 of the 14 activities listed. The two most common actions taken were passive in nature: touching upon, *but not emphasizing*, sexual sin or sexual brokenness (61%) or God’s design for healthy sexuality (56%) in sermons. Far fewer pastors preached an intentional message that focused on either sexual sin (41%) or God’s design for healthy sexuality (37%). Nearly one in ten churches (8%) hadn’t done any of the activities listed.

ACTIONS TAKEN TO PROMOTE A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF SEXUALITY IN THE PREVIOUS YEAR



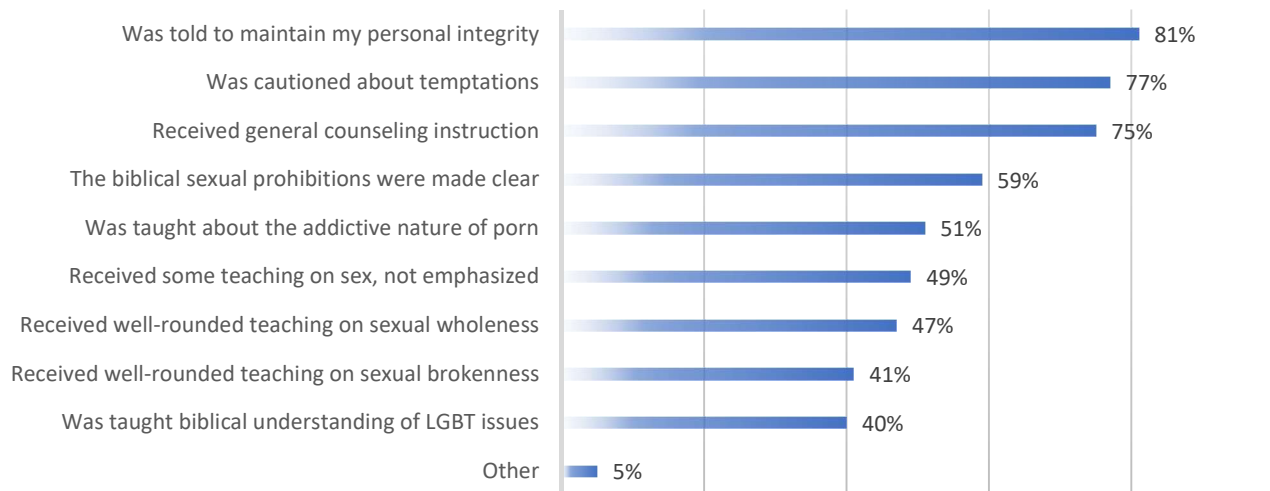
Pastoral training on sexual issues

5. Despite a low engagement with sexual topics in many churches, most pastors have received some training on sexual issues. Half (52%) have received training in seminary (43%) or another formal education program (23%), including 13 percent who received both forms of education. Six in ten (59%) have also received informal training, such as attending a conference or webinar, or using other resources. Only 15 percent of pastors indicated that they had no training on sexual issues at all.

6. Of the 43% of pastors with some seminary training, the majority claimed to have received “good advice” instruction, such as maintaining one’s sexual integrity (81%) and being aware of temptations common to their position (77%). Three-fourths of pastors also received general instruction for providing pastoral care (75%).

7. When asked about specific issues, only half of seminary-trained pastors (51%) were taught about the addictive nature of pornography and 40 percent were taught a biblical understanding of same-sex attraction and LGBT issues. Fewer than half remembered receiving “well-rounded instruction on sexual wholeness according to God’s design” (47%) or “well-rounded instruction on addressing sexual brokenness and sin” (41%).

Descriptions for seminary training



Staff care and office policies

8. One-third of pastors (32%) say they promote sexual integrity among staff by discussing the issue at least 2-3 times per year, while another one in five (18%) do so once a year or less. Four in ten pastors (38%) only address sexual integrity with staff when an issue arises and one in ten (9%) have never broached the topic with staff.

9. Robust staff care related to sexual integrity is largely absent in most churches. The most common action is to discuss the importance of sexual integrity during the hiring process (40%). Other actions include adopting technology solutions in the office (26%), addressing the staff corporately about sexual integrity (23%) and encouraging staff to meet privately with the pastor if they have struggles. Just 15 percent of pastors regularly discuss personal sexual temptations and challenges with staff. One-third of churches (34%) have taken none of these steps to promote sexual integrity among staff.

Pastoral self-care

10. In order to maintain their own sexual integrity, most pastors turn to prayer (85%) and studying the Bible (79%). Other common practices include engaging in spiritual practices such as prayer, fasting, and meditation (68%), avoiding nudity and sexual content in media (65%), and adopting office policies that reduce opportunities for temptation (62%). Less common practices include practicing accountability with another person (37%), using filtering programs on office computers (28%) and personal devices (25%), and practicing personal confession with another person (23%).

Ministry implications

1. Creating a safe and supportive church culture focused on sexual integrity requires a high degree of intentionality and engagement. Churches that engage in the highest number intentional activities are significantly more likely to offer pastoral counseling and host a support group than churches that had done nothing intentional, and significantly more likely to train and equip lay leaders to help those struggling with sexual issues and offer other helpful resources than churches with low or no intentionality. [Half-measures and a weak commitment do not lead to culture change.](#)

2. Highly-intentional pastoral self-care is essential to creating a healthy church environment. Four in ten (40%) pastors with the strongest self-care system were approached on a monthly basis by congregation members seeking guidance with sexual issues. This differs considerably from pastors with medium (21%), low (15%), and no (12%) self-care support. This suggests a safe environment where people are comfortable sharing their troubles with their pastor. Pastors with the most-active self-care system (58%) were also significantly more likely to demonstrate a moderate church engagement on sexual issues (4-6 intentional activities/past year) than pastors with medium (26%), low (15%), or no (0%) self-care support. [If pastors aren't focused on their own sexuality integrity their churches won't be either.](#)

3. Deliberate staff care is also an essential element of creating a culture of sexual integrity in churches. In a previous report, we shared that many pastors encounter sexual problems among staff, the most common of which are lust (17%), porn use by a husband (16%), and sexual problems within marriages (15%). It will be challenging to open up difficult conversations about sexual issues in churches if the pastor and staff haven't learned how to do so first. [Vulnerability, transparency, and trust must be established among leadership teams before expecting the congregation to embrace a culture of sexual integrity.](#)

4. Adopting office policies to support sexual integrity is an important (and easy) first step to larger church culture change. Many churches have yet to employ basic protections for the office environment, such as utilizing filtering software and developing office policies designed to promote sexual integrity. These responses shouldn't be presented in a fear-based or shaming way, but as common-sense precautions in a highly-sexualized culture. [Small shifts in church culture become the foundation from which larger congregational efforts can proceed.](#)

5. Many pastors struggle with a knowledge and training deficit. In the research shared here and in our earlier report and through in-depth interviews, many pastors admit that they are unprepared for the variety and intensity of sexual challenges they encounter in their churches. When asked how an outside organization might help, one-third of the pastors we surveyed shared that they were interested in materials to offer the congregation; one in five would appreciate pastoral training on these issues. These are remarkably high response rates for an open-ended survey question. [There is a clear opportunity for other ministries to partner with pastors and churches to create a church environment that is highly-engaged, safe, and supportive on sexual issues.](#)