

Leadership Journal, Winter 2006

Restoring Fallen Pastors

The road back to ministry after a moral lapse—whether physical or virtual—is long and difficult. How can the restoration process be improved?

by Eric Reed

For Russ it's a little slice of heaven—a small church in a stagnant, rust-bucket town, landlocked, with a cramped creaky building, perennial money woes, and trust issues, and with no staff other than himself.

It's nothing like his last church, Woodland—the plum assignment in his region—a thriving suburban congregation near a bustling urban center, with several paid staff, gifted leaders, superior musicians, and strong sense of its mission. And, to his family's delight, good schools, loving friends, and a really nice parsonage.

This church has little of that. But for Russ, it's heaven—because he almost lost everything. Russ got hooked on internet pornography. Russ's addiction led to an emotional attachment outside his marriage and eventually a physical encounter. That's when he confessed to his wife and his denominational supervisor.

"Some who have been through our process say they are grateful for it; others have said it's the worst experience they've ever been through."

And life, as he knew it and loved it, ended.

Russ is not the only pastor whose story goes like this. No one knows how many of the 19,200 pastors required to leave ministry each year do so because of a moral lapse. In our surveys over the years, up to 12 percent of pastors confess inappropriate physical involvement outside of marriage. Churches knew how to handle adulterers—"kick 'em out" being the leading response. But the internet makes pornography readily available, and denominational law, in most cases, doesn't adequately address this new category of moral lapse.

In one poll, Leadership found 38 percent of pastors said internet pornography was a temptation to them. That temptation only grows as technology delivers porn to the pastor's study, and the best protective devices systems can be eluded.

"I installed a filter that includes two accountability partners who receive reports on all my internet activity and only my wife has the passwords," one pastor said. "But if I reset my computer to the day before I installed the filter, I can get around all that. Now my temptation is not to run off with my secretary but to reset my computer."

For many, the road to destruction is wired—trip-wired. And the road back is almost unmapped. Some denominations are carving a path for restoring failed pastors, but a lot of denominations and virtually all independent churches have no road at all.

Leaders in independent churches or loosely-connected congregations are on their own in finding a way to restoration. Even with extensive coverage of clergy misconduct over the past decade, congregations still make no plans for handling moral failure until it happens. Then it's too late. Their judgments are reactionary, and some who might be restored to ministry after a process of confession and treatment are instead lost to the fields of insurance and auto sales.

Even in the better situations, pastors are often dependent on sketchy ethical guidelines and the kindness of strangers if they are to return to ministry. Like Russ, they must cobble together their own restoration.

While Russ sold cars

We told Russ's story five years ago ("Hooked" in Leadership, Winter 2001). At the time Russ had been out of ministry one year and was selling cars. His wife, Angie, was working long hours at a small shop. They had lost the plum assignment, with the good salary and nice parsonage, and moved miles from their support systems. Two of their three children were in new schools—the eldest stayed behind to finish her senior year in high school—and the middle child was not adjusting well. She developed an eating disorder. The word that best describes that time: exile.

"We were abandoned," Angie later said with tears. She was angry that the process robbed her of all her friends in the congregation. Then her friends in ministry disappeared. "When we needed help the most, nobody was there."

"Basically, we were told that I would be out of ministry for two years," Russ said. "We would be required to move away from our former church, to attend a church in our denomination, and I would meet with the pastor of that church. But during that time I would be able to do no ministry. After two years the denomination would meet to reconsider my appointment. Beyond that, there was very little 'process.' My denominational supervisors apparently didn't want to hear from me until my two-year sentence was over. I was mostly on my own to figure it out."

Russ's denomination, not a small one, still has little in the way of process. Russ and Angie were on their own to find counseling and a church whose pastor would agree to their presence while Russ waited. They were also on their own to find jobs and a rental house. There was no financial assistance beyond a couple months' severance offered by the Woodland church. Two dozen similar offenders still in hiding called Russ to confess, but other than rubberneckers, there was no contact from the ministry colleagues he had known for 20 years.

"What I did was embarrassing to the denomination," Russ said. "We were being punished."

"We were shunned," said Angie.

Some systems work

Today Russ carefully studies the efforts of other denominations. "When a pastor has a moral lapse in The United Methodist Church, they're on him immediately," he said. "They're there with counseling for the family—they want to keep the marriage together—and with assistance to keep him in ministry after the restoration process is over."

The process Russ endured seemed punitive rather than restorative, and he questions its goals.

"What are we after when we talk about restoration?" asks Will Willimon, bishop of the North Alabama Conference of the United Methodist Church. "Is it simply restoration to a position, or is it restoration in spirit and in the Christian life? The ultimate goal of any restoration process should be restoration to life in Christ, not just to a position."

In the case of moral lapse, the UMC assigns a counselor to the pastor and a denominational elder who supervises the process and makes recommendation as to when the pastor is ready to return to ministry.

"Some who have been through our process say they are grateful for it; others have said it's the worst experience they've ever been through," Willimon said. He wonders if there are too many hoops to jump through. "I think our process has too many rules. Today, people substitute rules for wisdom. Instead of those with true wisdom being called alongside to help, we have put rules in their place."

Still, calling help alongside broken pastors is one of the strengths of the UMC system.

"Our denomination was founded on the basis that you never walk alone, and our church leaders never walk alone," Willimon said. That's one characteristic of the UMC process Russ appreciates. Russ had few people to share his journey back, and his wife had none.

The key questions

Even so, some have it worse. At least for Russ, with a denomination that has responsibility to call and credential its ministers, there was someone in charge above the local church board. In independent churches or denominations built on loose associations, the pastor is at the mercy of lay leaders who have no experience in such circumstances. In those situations, the ethos is often: Screw up and you're out. And there's no higher authority to hear an appeal.

"In the Southern Baptist Convention, we believe strongly in the concept of the priesthood of the believer," Barney Self said. "Our churches are loosely connected, so each church will have its own way of approaching restoration."

Self is director of the pastoral ministries division of Lifeway Christian Resources, the SBC's publishing house. Lifeway sponsors retreats for pastors in trying circumstances.

"We try to get these wounded pastors to look at the pain they've encountered. Many times they just melt into a puddle and lose it," Self said. Participation in such events is voluntary—local church autonomy has its drawbacks—and for fallen pastors in those settings, the road back is unclear.

"It would be nice if the restoration process was a bit more organized," Self said.

Brooks Faulkner, Lifeway's director of Leader Care agrees. "Frankly, I wish we had a better process. There almost is no process. It's just too loosely set up."

Doug Boudinot counsels porn-addicted pastors. He says the larger questions are going unanswered.

"From my experience, churches aren't as interested in recovery; they're just interested in doing damage control," Boudinot said. "And most denominations, from what I've seen, don't even try to understand the complexity of the problem. They don't know the whole concept of salving emotional wounds, so they just go right to protecting the church—which is important—but most of them put a Band-Aid on cancer, so to speak."

Many questions must be addressed by restoration process, among them:

- * Which offenses require absence from ministry?
- * Is exposure to pornography an equally serious offense as an actual sexual affair?
- * How long is the pastor to be out of ministry?
- * What are the requirements for counseling and who will oversee it?
- * Will there be any financial support for the pastor and family?
- * Will the pastor's spouse be included in counseling and in meetings with the denomination or restoration team?
- * After the restoration process, how will the pastor find a new position?
- * And what will the new congregation be told about his season on the sidelines?

New rules for virtual sins

Most denominations have regulations for judging adultery. For those that allow a lapsed pastor to return, two years out of ministry and removal of credentials is common. (In the Church of the Nazarene, the process is to be "not less than four years," according to the discipline.)

What is less common is a prescribed process for repentance and clear expectations of the offender. With church hierarchies using disciplines or codes of ethics dating back decades or centuries, there is no standard for the treatment of addiction to pornography. In fact, agreement on the seriousness of the offense is hard to find.

Among Southern Baptists, internet pornography is usually seen in the same light as an affair, according to Faulkner.

Bishop Willimon said, "Pornography is one of the middle-ground sorts of things. There's no physical act of violation actually taking place on anyone else. It's one of those 'victimless' activities, and it's really hard to classify, but it's taken seriously."

One Church of the Nazarene executive says in his denomination, infractions involving pornography are not taken as seriously as sexual relationships.

The Mennonite Church USA takes a harder line, adjudging porn addictions generally as they do affairs. "In most cases that I can think of, it was treated the same way," denomination minister Dale Stoltzfus said.

The Assemblies of God has developed a comprehensive strategy for restoration, including guidelines for judging the use of pornography. The AG's system "seems to work fairly well," says Faulkner, a Baptist. "I think we need to take some lessons from the Assemblies of God."

The denomination has identified five stages of porn use, each with its own required restoration process.

curiosity: requires three months professional counseling.

experimental: requires six months professional counseling.

regular: requires one year professional counseling and a three-month suspension of credentials.

habitual: requires one year professional counseling and a six-month suspension of credentials.

addictive: requires two years of professional counseling.

Whether or not the process has been clearly defined prior to the offense, what makes a restoration work? Often, it's the attitude of the offender.

Roads broad and narrow

At a conference of young leaders a few years back, two men stood out. Both were founding pastors of Generation-X congregations. (At the time we were just learning to call them "emerging.")

Although their ministry philosophies were embryonic, their presentations at the gathering were confident. The crowd was jazzed by what they heard, even when delivered with the characteristic what-do-I-know, sole-scuffing, just-one-of-the-guys hesitance.

Both men witnessed phenomenal growth in their churches over the next couple of years, and both were becoming sought-out sherpas on the emergent expedition.

Then, suddenly, both were out of their pulpits. Moral failure.

Three years later, one of those men is making forays back into ministry and is expected to find new, meaningful avenues for service; the other vanished. What's the difference?

One was surrounded by a team of colleagues who wanted to walk with him through a process of examination, confession, and restoration. The other, it is said, rejected offers of accountability.

Despite the shortcomings of his denomination's system, Russ wanted to return to ministry. More important, he wanted to save his marriage and to preserve his family. He surrounded himself, as best he could, with people who would offer support and accountability. And he confessed his sin.

Russ's wife stuck by him. While taking the kids and going home to her parents might have been easier, Angie stayed with her husband and stayed fully engaged in the marriage.

The pastor of the congregation they joined became Russ's advocate before the denomination when his two-year time-out ended. This pastor demanded action on a petition for Russ's reinstatement, opening the door for a new church to call restored Russ as their pastor.

But the third partner in his journey back is one Russ didn't expect. A volunteer. He was a pastor Russ barely knew who vowed to hold Russ accountable for his spiritual relationship with Christ, his commitment to renewing his love for his wife, and his sexual thoughts and actions.

"I had never had a man ask me that before: Have you seen pornography? Have you masturbated?" Russ said. But Russ gave this man an all-access pass to his thought life. Russ confessed, and repented—turned away—from his sin.

And his accountability partner continues to meet monthly with Russ for prayer and Bible study—and mutual accountability.

Counselor Boudinot says this kind of confession is key to successful restoration.

"I want a man who is struggling with his own struggles. If he was caught by his wife or his church, it's not going to work for him. He has to be broken. He has to be ready to change. I tell them, 'If your wife died tomorrow, that would not change what you must do to be restored.' That usually puts it right in their faces. This is not about getting back in bed with your wife."

"My experience has been that there are no in-betweens," said the Nazarene executive. "For those who succeed, there is usually right up front a spirit of contrition and brokenness and openness. The other extreme is that they maintain their innocence and go out bitter and angry at the denominational leaders, the church, and angry and bitter that they got caught."

"Forgiveness is not an easy route," according to Mennonite Stoltzfus. "A significant number of pastors who cross ethical boundaries really struggle on following through with our guidelines for restoration." In fact, many choose not to, opting instead to leave their denomination or leave ministry altogether.

"Restoration has a lot to do with the concept of grace," Willimon said. "Grace is often viewed as a sort of 'non-judgmental ooze' that extends to everybody. But often the person who's experienced God's grace has been through absolute hell."

Russ would agree. He remembers the long days on the car lot when all that was before him was the hurt in Angie's eyes and his children's confusion and anger. He remembers the Sundays

sitting in the pew watching another man preach and feeling a great distance between himself and God. He remembers the day he turned off the computer and walked out of his church office, possibly never to return.

He remembers.

Grace in hell

Russ hasn't gone public with his story. (We're still using pseudonyms in this account and changing some identifying details.) His ministry colleagues know, of course. And Russ is waiting for the opportunity to address his denomination's restoration process. "My supervisor knows I want to tell them about my experience and what they can do to make it more effective for the next pastor who has to live through it."

His new congregation knows he went through a restoration process, which implies moral indiscretion. "I've had several men ask me, 'I know something happened in your past, so help me wrestle with this. What do I do?'"

"And Angie and I have counseled some couples in similar situations, and we tell them they can get through it, if they really want to. People look at us today and say, 'You're much more, well, loving. You're affectionate, and we can see you really love each other.' And it's true. It took time, but our marriage is better today than it ever has been.

"Forgiveness is possible. Restoration is possible."

It's conjecture, but Russ's best days of ministry may be ahead of him. As Boudinot pointed out, "Brokenness is the very conduit God heals others through. Many pastors I have counseled have broken through to greater ministry because they are willing to speak about their own brokenness. It's wonderful to see that."

"Life in our little town is good," Russ confirmed. "True, the church is about a third the size of Woodland, and no, we don't have all that we had there. The town is remote and it isn't growing, but we like living here. Our oldest daughter is married, and we have a grandchild now. Our middle daughter is in college and is doing well. And our youngest is in high school, and he loves it here. He's thriving.

"The kids have forgiven me, too," Russ said. Even the one who complained bitterly and frequently for a while about Dad's "mistake" and the friends they lost in the moves.

And how is Russ? Is internet pornography still a temptation?

"I have a filter on the computer and Angie has the passwords. When we came here, I asked if the congregation would pay for a filter service, and they agreed. I have my family's pictures above my desk, overlooking my computer screen. I don't ever want to put them through that again.

"We had the opportunity to leave for a larger congregation recently, but God didn't release us to go there. My wife, who was reluctant to come here, said to me, 'In four years I have fallen in love

with these people, and now you want me to leave them?' She was right. Late on a Saturday night, I called my supervisor and declined the call. We stayed.

"We're in a good place."

With additional reporting by Leadership editorial resident Abram Book.

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