

# Confidentiality



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## Leader's Guide

*How to use "Confidentiality" by BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS in your regularly scheduled meetings.*

Welcome to *BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS: Your Complete Guide to Leadership Training*. You've purchased an innovative resource that will help you develop leaders who can think strategically and biblically about the church. Selected by the editors of *Leadership Resources* and *Christianity Today International*, the material comes from respected thinkers and church leaders.

With *BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS*, you don't have to build a program from scratch or take another night to be out. *BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS* works when you want it to, where you want it to, the way you want it to. It's completely flexible and designed to be easy to use.

You probably already have a monthly meeting with board members or regularly scheduled meetings with other committees or groups of leaders. *BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS* fits easily into what you're already doing. Here's how to use *BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS* at the beginning of a board meeting or committee meeting:

**1. Select a learning tool.** In this theme of "Confidentiality," you'll find multiple types of handouts from which to choose:

- ◆ Bible study
- ◆ case study
- ◆ activities
- ◆ interview
- ◆ devotionals
- ◆ resources
- ◆ assessment tools
- ◆ how-to articles
- ◆ retreat plan

**2. Select a handout.** Suppose, for example, you want to give a devotional about gossip. You could select one of the two devotionals in this theme: "When Gossip Is Good" (p. 10) or "The Danger of an Unbridled Tongue" (p. 11). From these options, select the one that best fits what you want to accomplish.

**3. Print and photocopy the handout.** Let's say you selected "The Danger of an Unbridled Tongue." Photocopy as many copies as you need—you do not need to ask for permission to photocopy any material from *BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS* (as long as you are using the material in a church or educational setting and are not charging for it).

**4. Prepare for the discussion.** We recommend you read the Scripture passages and identify key discussion questions. How will you apply the principles to specific situations in your church?

**5. Lead the discussion.** Most handouts can be read within 5 minutes. After you have allowed time for reading, begin the discussion by asking one of the provided questions. Be ready to move the discussion on to specific issues your church is facing.

Most *BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS* handouts can be discussed in 15 or 20 minutes (except the Bible study, which may take longer). Your board, committee, or team will still have plenty of time to discuss its agenda.

Need more material, or something on a specific topic? See our website at [www.BuildingChurchLeaders.com](http://www.BuildingChurchLeaders.com).

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## What Can I Tell People at Church?

*Scripture encourages us to confess our sins to fellow believers.*

Galatians 6:2; James 5:13–16

### Read

*Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray...Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise him up. If he has sinned, he will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective (James 5:13–16).*

### Reflect

Sometimes the church is the last to hear about a mistake or problem in its leadership. Yet James 5:13–16 says that when we face trouble, we should share it with the church, seeking people's counsel and prayers. It is only when one tells the church that the body can do what Paul commands: "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal. 6:2).

What is good for Christians in general usually applies to church leaders in particular. In many cases the instinctive *I can't tell anyone!* needs to be replaced with *But I've got to*. Of course, when the major aspect of the leader's mistake involves people in the church, a more disinterested party may give the best help. But leaders are wise not to overlook the aid available in their own church.

♦ *Looking back, can you think of a time when you would have benefited from sharing a particular struggle with other Christians?*

Dick Lincoln has set up an advisory group at his church. "These friends don't have an official capacity in the church government. They carry no weight and cast no votes. I've gathered them with the sole responsibility to advise. I can take any matter to them and get their opinions. They've helped me discover my strengths and find my own worth—while cautioning me about my weaknesses. They help me see things clearly, usually *before* I stumble into a mistake."

Glen Knecht believes a multitude of counselors helps the most. He advises: "Listen to the other elders. They know more than we often think they do." God populates his church with gifted people who can rescue errant leaders.

♦ Read Proverbs 12:15. What individuals or groups could give us impartial yet wise advice?

The problems with going to the church are obvious: confidentiality, biases, a fear of vulnerability. Sometimes certain church members may well *be* the problem. Here are a few reasons *not* to reach out for help from individuals or groups within the church:

1. They are substantial participants in or causes of our mistake.
2. They have become our adversaries.
3. They love us so much they can't be critical.
4. Confiding in them would harm our long-term relationship.
5. We cannot trust them to hold confidences.
6. They are so involved with the matter that unbiased advice is unlikely.

♦ *Despite the difficulties involved, why would God call us to confess sin? See 1 John 1:9 and Psalm 32:1–5.*

By opening up to others for help, church leaders may find a greater reservoir of understanding and love in their church than they had ever dreamed.

—JAMES D. BERKLEY

### Discuss

1. How might church leaders benefit from sharing struggles with the wider church? Be specific.
2. What sins do we need to confess only to God, and why?
3. What are some issues we should take to an outside adviser for help?



## Protecting Sensitive Information

*Act now to secure your church against breaches of confidence.*

Proverbs 11:13–14; 16:28

*Jeff Hanna is the executive director of GuideOne Center for Risk Management. He is the author of Safe and Secure: The Alban Guide to Protecting Your Congregation (The Alban Institute, 1999). BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS spoke to him about how to protect church confidentiality.*

### **A church office is full of sensitive documents: personnel files, counseling files, pledge cards, financial giving records, pastoral correspondence. How would you advise churches to keep those documents safe?**

There are two aspects to this answer: hard copy documents and electronic documents.

On the paper side, we advise using locked filing cabinets. It's important that a church, especially a church that is incorporated, has its minutes and documents from meetings secured and has copies of those available, because at times churches are brought into litigation or asked to look at the records.

To keep documents secure, we also advise locking offices and limiting access to offices. We urge protecting those documents, too, should anything happen. For instance, to protect against fire loss, churches should have backup copies off site or in a fireproof container on site.

On the electronic side, we encourage churches to use computer passwords and firewalls to restrict access. Passwords can be set up to enable different users to access certain documents on a computer network.

There is a wide range of church-specific software packages that can manage everything from membership records to giving records to births, deaths, and baptisms.

### **How can churches know who should have access to certain information?**

It needs to be in their bylaws. For instance, if a member wants to have access to information about the church's spending, in most denominations a member by law has the right to do that. However, if the person is no longer a member or has never become a member, the church may limit their access to particular documents.

For the most part, members have the right to view the financial dealings of the church. If I am a member and am giving to the church, I have a right then to ask, "Where are you spending this money?" However, if a person is only an attender or a former member and says, "I'd like to look at the records," the church is not obligated to give him or her access to church records.

### **Can members get only general financial information, or do they have the right to know staff salaries, for instance?**

Congregational members in most denominations have the ability to see staff salaries upon request. It's been questioned a few times in the courts, but the trend seems to be that membership does give people the ability to look at the detailed spending habits of the church. However, that does not include the ability to know who is giving what amount of money to the church.

### **If a church fails to keep documents secure, what are the risks?**

In terms of confidentiality, pastoral counseling certainly comes to mind. Say the pastor has records of his counseling sessions on a computer that is not secure. You can imagine the horrible things that could come out should someone see those counseling notes, whether it is a secretary or another staff member or a member of the church. That's where security issues are really important. If people begin sharing information that was meant to be confidential, a pastor could possibly be sued for libel or slander. ➤



JEFF HANNA

*"Preparation and documentation are the keys to managing confidentiality issues."*



## Protecting Sensitive Information *continued*

### **If somebody in church leadership is doing something illegal, what steps should a church take?**

Let's take embezzlement, for example. If someone in a church, perhaps a long-time treasurer, embezzles but then becomes repentant, asks for forgiveness, and works out a repayment agreement, it is purely up to the church to decide if it wants to prosecute. I've seen it go both ways. Some churches say theft is theft and the law is the law, and they prosecute. Other churches choose not to do that.

The best approach is to have procedures in place. Consider several possibilities. What if the person stealing from the church is not a staff member? What if it's a kid down the street? Do you prosecute? Those are things you should think about beforehand.

Also, decide who has the authority to make these decisions. There have been disputes when a pastor has made the decision on his own not to proceed with prosecution, and church members or boards have challenged that. That is why it is important to have issues decided before an instance occurs.

On any procedures you put in place, always have them viewed by legal counsel. Churches should retain legal counsel, so they can refer these kinds of questions to them.

Another good point is always to keep things in writing. Many churches make decisions verbally and then don't document them. When a church gets into litigation with confidentiality, libel, or slander issues, a church must have procedures in place and be able to produce records of the minutes and decisions that were made.

### **Ministers are called upon to be counselors in most churches. Is that risky, given all the legal issues that surround that?**

We have to be careful we don't let fear of these things stymie ministry. If I'm afraid that everything I do could cause me some concern in court, I may not take any risks and therefore not do ministry.

On the other hand, at times pastors need to recognize when something is beyond their scope of knowledge. If pastors come across a very intense problem that will need more than counseling, they should refer it to someone else. Most pastors can do initial counseling, and some are qualified to do long-term counseling. Therefore, this issue may depend on the qualifications of the pastor.

I encourage churches to establish counseling procedures. For instance, a church may set a guideline that a pastor shouldn't go to a home to counsel someone of the opposite sex, or that the pastor should counsel someone only five or six times and then refer. If a church doesn't have procedures in place, it opens itself to problems. The churches that get in the most trouble are those that think nothing can happen to them. They don't put procedures or practices into place, and that lack of planning comes back to haunt them.

### **Discuss**

1. In what ways are we already protecting sensitive information?
2. In what areas do we need to create policies and procedures, and how will we do that?
3. To whom can we go for legal advice?



## Why Am I Controlling Information?

3 ways to test motives.

Psalm 51:10–13

*Not all secrets are wrong. The key is to search my motives. Am I controlling information for the purpose of controlling people, or am I withholding information for the purpose of serving their best interests?*

	<i>Sometimes true of me</i>	<i>Rarely true of me</i>	<i>Never true of me</i>
<p><b>1. I can control others by choosing what I will and will not tell them.</b></p> <p>A danger of secrecy is that it tends to carry in it the seeds of pride and power. If I know the board is going to cut one of two staff members, I could play them off against one another. In separate conversations, I could see which one would be more willing to take a pay cut or shoulder more responsibilities—then encourage the board to let the other one go.</p>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<p><b>2. I feel pride when I know something sooner than the rest of the church.</b></p> <p>Another destructive side of secrecy occurs when you are privy to information long before anyone else. As a public announcement is being made regarding a matter you knew about long ago, it's tempting to sit back and think, <i>I'm way ahead of everyone else. I'm important.</i> It gives you a temporary sense of significance, but something devious is happening. Pride is seeping into the deep wells of your personality.</p>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<p><b>3. I use information to impress or manipulate people.</b></p> <p>I can manipulate people and wield power by leading individuals to believe I'm sharing privileged information with only them. I simply have to say, "Bill, I think so highly of you, let me tell you what's happening with..." and then drop the juicy tidbit. Then I could say essentially the same thing to someone else, assuring each person that he or she is favored, creating a sense of loyalty based on a lying manipulation.</p>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

—JACK HAYFORD. Adapted from *Who's in Charge?* (Multnomah Books, 1993). Used with permission.

### Discuss

1. What are some other ways we can misuse confidential information?
2. How can a leader combat pride that comes from knowing privileged information?
3. Think silently about an aspect of handling information you would like to improve. Read Psalm 51:10–13.



# Keys to Confidentiality

*How is information handled in our church?*  
Psalm 37:3

The following assessment helps identify what information needs to be kept confidential in church and how to do that.

### Documented information

This includes personnel information, counseling files, notes, letters, memos, pledge cards, and individual giving records. To protect the confidentiality of such records, they should be kept in locked filing cabinets or on secured computers and accessed only by authorized personnel.

Yes No

◆ **We have a system to identify and store sensitive documents.**

Some information is needed to compile reports for staff members and the congregation. People who prepare such reports should have the proven ability to keep quiet.

◆ **An identified, limited number of trustworthy people have access to our sensitive documents.**

When hard information is no longer needed, it should be properly disposed of. Dumping documents isn't the best way, since that might expose them to curious eyes. Shredding is better.

◆ **We have a shredder to dispose of information we no longer need.**

### Verbal information

On the phone or in person, office employees field questions about personal appointments or express concerns about church members. Guarding this conversation can be difficult. Some churches require office workers to sign a statement of confidentiality before being hired. Other churches include a confidentiality clause in their employee handbook.

◆ **Our church's office workers have promised in writing to keep such conversation confidential.**

Information can be leaked unintentionally. If a secretary gets a phone call from a distraught person, the secretary may have to ask questions before directing the call. If potential eavesdroppers are nearby, the caller should be put on hold until the area can be cleared.

◆ **Our church secretary knows how to handle sensitive phone calls or drop-in visits.**

Many offices log phone calls or keep copies of messages. This information could be harmful if shared with others. It might be wise to limit access to the church office.

◆ **Phone logs and other potentially sensitive records are kept in a discreet place, and access to the church office is limited.**

People who are privy to certain church information should regularly be reminded of their obligation to maintain confidentiality. What each person should ask prior to divulging information is: Does this person have a need to know it? If not, the information should be kept quiet.

◆ **Those in church leadership and administrative positions know what information is confidential and to whom it should be disclosed.**

—JEFF HANNA

### Discuss

1. In which areas are we doing well preserving confidentiality?
2. In which areas are we not careful enough with private information?
3. What steps does our church need to make to ensure confidentiality?



## Is This Gossip?

*9 questions to help you decide.*  
Proverbs 11:13; 26:20

*How do you know when it is beneficial to share information, and when it is useless or destructive to do so? Ask yourself the following questions to help you choose your words wisely.*

1. Am I telling this to someone who can do something about the problem by helping the person or offering discipline or correction?
2. If not, am I telling this to someone who is wise enough to help me sort out my feelings and courageous enough to make me do the right thing: to confront the person or to confess where I was at fault?
3. Is this news approved for sharing?
4. Am I breaking a confidence? If so, is it only because the person is endangering someone's life, including his or her own?
5. Am I willing to say from whom I got this information so the information can be checked for accuracy?
6. When I say this, does it break my heart?
7. Have I taken time to examine my life and confess to God how I also sin like that?
8. Am I praying for the person?
9. Would I feel comfortable if someone were saying this about me?

—KEVIN A. MILLER

### **Discuss**

1. Why do we sometimes want to share information when we shouldn't?
2. How can we determine if someone is wise enough to give us counsel (question 2, above)?
3. What are some consequences of gossip within the church? Read Proverbs 26:20.



## When Keeping Quiet Hurts

*What if your reputation suffers from another's actions?*

Psalm 119:30–32; 1 Corinthians 4:5

### The Case

Several years ago we entered into a purchase agreement to buy a church building and property that also housed a private school. The purchase agreement specified that we would keep the school open until the faculty and administration had ample time to relocate.

All was going smoothly when disaster struck. Routine inspections during the closing procedures revealed a significant amount of asbestos in the school building.

Our church leaders faced a serious dilemma: If we kept our word and opened the school on schedule, as the purchase agreement specified, we would endanger the health of schoolchildren. If we backed out, citing the potential for high-risk health hazards, we would have to lay off our faculty in mid-August.

It was an agonizing decision, but we could not in good conscience expose children to this danger. We decided to slow down the purchase of the school. To outsiders, it looked as if a good deal had gone bad because we were hesitant and untrustworthy.

When representatives of the other church relayed our actions to the school faculty, the asbestos problem was not mentioned. The teachers were simply told that we were backing out of the agreement, and they were losing their jobs.

Soon I began receiving scathing letters from the faculty members. Their correspondence reflected a mixture of confusion and astonishment. Why would a church such as ours, with a reputation for honesty and integrity, suddenly break our contract with them? They were unaware of the asbestos problem, so the only conclusion they could reach was that we lacked integrity.

### What Would You Do?

- ◆ Would you go public with the asbestos problem to protect your church's reputation?
- ◆ Would you keep quiet, hoping the other party would eventually explain the situation? What if the other party kept silent?

### What Happened

Had I simply called the faculty together and explained the situation, I suspect the majority of teachers would have supported our decision. I also suspect the other church would have been harmed by the information.

I met with the school faculty and urged each of them to continue to trust our integrity, though circumstances suggested they should do otherwise. "We haven't changed character, though we have been forced to change course," I said. I believe they saw the pain on my face and heard the hurt in my voice. I never mentioned the asbestos problem.

In the following days, we gave each teacher a month's severance pay, though we were under no obligation to do so. God honored our actions in a remarkable fashion. Even though a new school year was nearly underway, every teacher secured a contract in another setting.

The asbestos eventually was removed from the building, and we completed the purchase. We did not have to jeopardize the rights and reputation of either congregation.

The other pastor later thanked me for our conduct during the crisis. Almost two years later, word about what really happened leaked out little by little. I received several apologies from those who had misjudged us.

When God calls us to control information in the best interest of others, he can also be trusted to control the situation.

—JACK HAYFORD. Adapted from *Who's in Charge?* (Multnomah Books, 1993). Used with permission.

### Discuss

1. Do you agree with this church's decision? Why or why not?
2. In what circumstances would it be wrong to keep silent about someone's action?
3. What Scripture passages support protecting another's reputation above your own?



## When Gossip Is Good

*Exploring the benefits of holy tongue wagging.*

2 Corinthians 1:7

**Read** “We know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort” (2 Corinthians 1:7).

**Reflect** I recently was working with other women in a food pantry. When the number of people we were helping started to drop, we became concerned because we knew many still needed more food. So we started what I call “holy gossip,” asking questions of neighbors, relatives, and friends to find out who needed food. We found plenty of people who qualified for help but weren’t coming to get it. So we made up packages, loaded them in our van, and delivered boxes to elderly people living alone.

*Gossip* is related to the word for godparent, so it has a holy derivation. I was shocked when I discovered this! Unholy gossip is bad, of course, but I have a healthy respect for holy gossip.

I love the part in our church service when, before prayer, we share joys and concerns. We hear about somebody’s grandkids visiting from Spokane or the birth of a great-grandchild. We also hear about someone losing a job or going into surgery.

The gossips get busy after church and call around. They get in touch with friends, neighbors, and relatives—Does he really want to see people, or is he too tired? Should I drop in today? That is good gossip.

When my husband and I go away for three months in the winter, I get the local newspaper delivered to me so I can keep up with things. When I come back, I always check in with a friend and ask, “What’s *really* been happening?” She fills me in, letting me know so-and-so’s wife died and he’s not doing too well, or so-and-so retired and he’s doing great—the sort of things I need to know to be a member of the community. The next time I see the person, I can ask about their news, or I can write a note to people in the hospital.

— KATHLEEN NORRIS

**Discuss**

1. What are some ways you can use holy gossip to show love and concern?
2. What is the difference between holy gossip and unholy gossip?
3. How can holy gossip help us build a stronger church community?

**Pray** Pray to use information to increase love and compassion in your community.



## The Danger of an Unbridled Tongue

*Thoughtless words can cause serious harm.*

James 3:7–8

**Read** “People can tame all kinds of animals and birds and reptiles and fish, but no one can tame the tongue. It is an uncontrollable evil, full of deadly poison” (James 3:7–8).

**Reflect** It was late on a June afternoon when we pulled off Interstate 94 into a rest area in eastern Montana. Erin, my three-year-old daughter, needed to use the restroom. My mother took Erin by the hand and walked up the paved path toward the facilities. As they neared the restroom, my mom felt a tug as Erin bent down to look at a young rattlesnake coiled on the path. Young rattlers have not yet learned to measure the venom they inject, so their bites can be lethal. Fortunately, this snake slithered away instead of striking Erin.

Many dangerous animals roam the Western wilderness—rattlesnakes, mountain lions, grizzly bears. But the most deadly creature of all is closer than you think. It’s a creature, says James, that none of us can tame: the tongue. The tongue’s deadly poison can shatter self-esteem, crush a joyful spirit, trigger anger, and divide friends. The tongue is a contradiction. The same tongue that sang “Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow” in worship can suddenly lash out at a spouse or a child on the drive home from church.

If no one can tame this dangerous animal, what can we do? Throughout Scripture we’re advised to think before we speak. Many of us have learned from hard experience not to blurt out the first words that come to mind. Yet the ultimate solution runs deeper: Tame not only the tongue, but also the thoughts that motivate the tongue. Envy, bitterness, unresolved resentments, pride, selfishness, and impulsiveness all lie behind our unbridled speech. We need to clean the garbage out of our hearts, admit our weaknesses to God, and ask him to deal with our sinfulness. Then our tongues will settle down, tamed and harmless.

— STEVE MATHEWSON. Adapted from *Leadership Meditations* (Tyndale, 2001). Used with permission.

**Discuss**

1. Tell about a time when you averted a bad situation by controlling your words.
2. Name some ways we can control our tendencies to say things we regret.
3. What can we do when we’ve blurted out something we shouldn’t have?

**Pray** Ask God to purify your heart and mind, and to enrich your words with his wisdom and grace.



## Strategy for a Crisis

*8 key actions when scandal shakes your church.*

Proverbs 22:3

*With the increasing number of reported sexual or other illegal misconduct in churches, it is wise to prepare in advance for such a crisis. Establish a several-member response team and train them to take the following actions.*

**Meet immediately with legal counsel.** It is unlikely that someone within the church will be sufficiently trained to handle this kind of situation. Consult someone specializing in church crisis management. You will want to specifically discuss issues of how to protect the work of the team under the attorney/client privilege.

**Determine if a criminal report is required.** Many states mandate the immediate reporting of incidents involving minors. Attorney Stephen Chawaga warns, “Failure to take action after hearing of a complaint, or turning a blind eye to misconduct a later investigation reveals, practically guarantees that your church will be sued” (“The Ten Deadly Lawsuits,” *Your Church*, May/June 2001, [www.christianitytoday.com/cbg](http://www.christianitytoday.com/cbg)).

**Advise the accused to seek an attorney.** In the case of criminal allegation, the church can have no part in offering the accused what may be construed as legal counsel.

**Contact your church’s insurance company.** Most church insurance providers protect against certain lawsuits. Just as you would contact your auto insurer in case of an accident, contact the church’s insurer to guide you through the necessary steps to ensure coverage.

**Assign liaisons.** A point person should maintain regular contact and provide pastoral support to the victim and the victim’s family. A different person should do the same for the accused.

**Develop a plan of communication.** Select a point person to handle communication with the church, media, authorities, and lawyers. Decide how communication will be offered. Generally, the closer a person is to the situation, the more detail he or she needs.

**Develop a plan for further investigation.** A church should not try to investigate whether the accused is guilty or innocent. Criminal investigation must be left to the authorities. But it is important for a church to determine if there are other victims.

**Make counseling available.** Provide professional counseling for the victims, victims’ families, and other affected youths in the program.

—MIKE WOODRUFF and DENNIS KASPER

### Discuss

1. What mistakes do we want to avoid if a church leader is accused of misconduct?
2. Who should be included on a crisis response team? Who would be best qualified to lead it?
3. What should be our next steps to prepare for allegations of misconduct?



## How to Report Staff Salaries

*A guide to handling delicate financial information.*

Proverbs 21:23

*Do church members have the right to information about the church, including staff salaries? Does giving to the church grant them access to all information?*

### Why Not to Disclose Individual Salaries

- ◆ Not everyone wants to know the yearly salaries of individual staff members. It's silly to offer information to people who don't care to know what the youth pastor earns.
- ◆ There generally is no compelling need for people to know how much a pastor takes home each month. In the workplace, this is private information. The church should be as courteous.
- ◆ Many people cannot appreciate the considerations that went into staff members' final packages.
- ◆ Knowing individual salaries could provoke envy or bitterness. Few would argue they don't deserve their salaries, but those making significantly less could be tempted toward jealousy.

To avoid these problems, we lump salary figures in one budget item in reporting. When I report that figure at our annual business meeting, I explain, "Though the figure looks enormous at first glance, keep in mind it supports over 100 families." I then detail the salary components, including medical, dental, retirement, and other benefits. Once people understand this, they usually agree our salaries are equitable.

### When to Disclose Salaries

I apply a need-to-know test with two parts:

1. Do people need to know this information because a staff member's salary is raising serious questions?
2. Is this information pertinent to a leadership issue and being requested by a qualified leader in the church?

If individuals meet either of these two criteria, I will consider sharing privileged salary information.

Occasionally, unusual circumstances call for divulging staff salaries. During a recession, our pastoral team asked not to receive a salary increase that year, expressing a concern for many in the church who were losing jobs. I shared that information during a morning sermon. I could feel the appreciation of the people. It confirmed in their minds the shepherding, servant spirit of these men and women and how the pastors existed to serve, not to exploit the church.

—JACK HAYFORD. Adapted from *Who's in Charge?* (Multnomah Books, 1993). Used with permission.

### Discuss

1. How does our church handle the disclosure of staff salaries? How do we feel about this approach?
2. Are there ways to improve our policies on what we disclose?
3. In what instances should a pastor discuss staff salaries with a congregation?



## When You've Said Something You Shouldn't Have

*2 questions to ask before passing on information.*

Matthew 7:12

### Recognizing the Problem

All the little tidbits I used to share about other people merely seemed like interesting conversation until one day three years ago. It happened over a diet Coke at my friend Ann's house. As we both tsk-tsked about the escalating divorce rate, Ann, whose husband had left her four years earlier, commented, "I'm so sorry for the women behind the statistics. I know what it's like to be alone and scared about what's going to happen to you next."

Just then, I thought about asking Ann to pray for Maris, a mutual friend who'd shared with me that her marriage was in trouble. So I rambled on with details of Maris's marital woes. Ann hadn't a clue our friend's marriage was so deeply troubled, and she felt terrible that Maris hadn't told her about it.

After our conversation, I felt sick in the pit of my stomach. As the days wore on, I could no longer stand my guilt and shame. I painfully realized I'd been wrong to share news that hadn't been mine to share. Not only had I broken my struggling friend's confidence, but I had put Ann in the midst of a distressing situation.

### Asking for Forgiveness

Finally, I swallowed my pride and phoned Ann to apologize. Then, taking a deep breath, I phoned Maris and asked if I could come over. Half an hour later I was at her door, a batch of brownies in hand. Before we even sat down, I blurted out in misery, "Maris, I blew it. Remember a month ago, when you shared with me how you and Mark were struggling in your marriage? Well, last week when Ann and I were talking, I told her about you and Mark. I'd meant to talk in general terms, but then...well, your name slipped out."

Maris's jaw dropped. Her lips quivered. She got teary-eyed.

I plunged ahead. "I wish I could take my words back, but I can't. Can you ever forgive me?"

Maris sighed. "I wish you hadn't said anything," she said slowly. "Having someone else know about it only makes it harder on me...and Mark. But you're right. You can't take your words back. I'll phone Ann, so she knows you talked to me, and I'll ask *her* to keep it confidential."

*Ouch.* Although Maris and I had been friends for five years, I knew it would take a long time before she would trust me again. As soon as I got to my car, the tears flowed. I thought of Proverbs 15:2: "The tongue of the wise commends knowledge, but the mouth of the fool gushes folly." I knew which one I represented.

### Learning from the Experience

After my experience with Ann and Maris, I knew I had to confess my wrongdoing to God and ask him to forgive me. I also needed to ask him for help with a big task: keeping my mouth shut when I should. Now when I'm privy to some juicy news, I ask myself two key questions before I unzip my lips:

1. *Is the news approved for sharing?* If the other person didn't tell me, "Go ahead and pass the news around," or "Would you ask our friends to pray for me?" then I don't. It's not my news to share.
2. *Would I want this news shared about me?* This is the real kicker. If I were sitting in a room with others blatantly talking about me, would I want what I had told them to be shared? Or would their chatter make me feel as though I'm in my underwear?

As the Bible's Golden Rule says, "Do to others what you would have them do to you" (Matthew 7:12).

—RAMONA CRAMER TUCKER

### Discuss

1. Think about a time when you said something you shouldn't have. What did you do about your mistake?
2. Why are we sometimes tempted to share news we shouldn't?
3. In what ways can gossip be destructive to the church?



## Pass the Secret

*3 activities to discover the effects of gossip.*

Proverbs 20:19

*Allow 10–15 minutes for each activity.*

### ◆ A Little Bird Told Me

This is a variation on the gossip game. The first person holds a plastic bird and says a sentence starting with, “A little bird told me...” (For example, “A little bird told me Joe bought a convertible.”) Then he passes the bird at random to someone else. That person should attempt to repeat exactly what the preceding player said and then add another statement. (For example, “A little bird told me Joe bought a convertible, and his wife doesn’t like it.”) The next person should repeat exactly all the person before said (without correcting it) and add another statement. Continue until everyone has contributed. In smaller groups, send the bird around a second time.

#### Discuss

1. How did the message change during the course of the game?
2. How is this like sharing private information or prayer requests?
3. Why do so many churches seem to have “a little bird” problem?

### ◆ Who Spilled the Beans?

Fill a container with 100 marbles, and set it on the table early in the meeting. Without warning, dump the marbles out on the table. Group members will probably try to corral the marbles as they scatter. Secretly bump the table to scatter them more. After a couple of minutes of collecting the marbles, look on the floor. Did you recover them all?

#### Discuss

1. Was anyone expecting the marbles to be scattered?
2. How difficult was it to catch them?
3. How is this like trying to corral a rumor?

Variations of this activity: trying to gather the feathers after a pillow fight, chasing bubbles to put the solution back in the bottle, putting air back in a balloon, putting toothpaste back in a tube.

### ◆ I’ve Got a Secret

Recreate the classic TV game show. One person is the contestant, one is the host, and the rest are panelists. The contestant has a secret, often an unusual hobby or achievement. Only the contestant and the host know the secret. Each panelist asks the contestant three yes or no questions. When the panelists have completed this, have them write on paper what they think is the secret. Then compare answers and see if anyone has guessed it.

Play this game twice. Privately tell the first contestant to be helpful and eager for the panelists to guess. Tell the second contestant to be reluctant.

#### Discuss

1. Did you notice a difference in the demeanor of the contestants?
2. How did their behavior affect uncovering the secret?
3. Is it possible to give away secrets without giving detailed answers?
4. How can we apply this to our conversations with people who know secrets?

—ERIC REED



## Further Exploration

*Resources for maintaining integrity with church information.*

**Called into Crisis** by *James D. Berkley*. This book helps church leaders transform crises into opportunities (Word Publishing, 1989; ISBN 0917463234).

**Leadership Meditations**, *David Goetz, editor*. These meditations focus on the external aspects of Christian leadership—family, management, mentoring, and servanthood (Tyndale, 2001, [www.Tyndale.com](http://www.Tyndale.com); ISBN 0842353690).

**Leading with Integrity** by *Fred Smith Sr.* A guide for Christian leaders who want to think carefully about the integrity of all aspects of their ministry (Bethany House Publishers, 1999; ISBN 1556619715).

**Making the Most of Mistakes** by *James D. Berkley*. This book offers the insight of church leaders sensitive to the pain and the promise of ministry mistakes (Word Publishing, 1987; ISBN 0917463153).

**Mastering Church Finances** by *Richard L. Bergstrom, Gary Fenton, and Wayne A. Pohl*. The authors discuss how to keep the finance committee ministry-minded, how to delegate financial affairs, how to handle designated gifts, how to deal with financial mismanagement, and how to determine staff salaries (Multnomah, 1992; ISBN 088070506X).

**Mastering Church Management** by *Don Cousins, Leith Anderson, and Arthur DeKruyter*. This covers strategies as well as the practical concerns of recruiting and training workers, developing good working relationships, and getting the structures in place for effective ministry (Multnomah, 1990; ISBN 0880703385).

**Safe and Secure: The Alban Guide to Protecting Your Congregation** by *Jeff Hanna*. This comprehensive and practical guide gives strategies for minimizing a congregation's liability while ensuring the safety of its members and visitors (The Alban Institute, 1999; ISBN 1566992117).

**Safeguard Solutions** from the *GuideOne Center for Risk Management*. This two-volume primer on risk management will help you start a high-quality risk management program for your church that will help save lives and protect property (visit [www.guideonecenter.com](http://www.guideonecenter.com)).

**Who's in Charge?** by *Leith Anderson, Jack Hayford, and Ben Patterson*. Three effective pastors bring insights on how to maintain emotional and spiritual equilibrium as church leaders (Word Publishing, 2000; ISBN 0880705418).



## Retreat Plan

*How to use “Confidentiality” at a weekend retreat.*

*BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS expands easily into a retreat format. Here is a sample retreat schedule you may follow for the “Confidentiality” theme. The purpose of this retreat is to help leaders learn how to control information in the church with honesty and wisdom.*

### Friday Evening

- ◆ 8–8:45 P.M. **Opening Session:** Hand out copies of “Protecting Sensitive Information,” the interview with Jeff Hanna on pages 4–5, and allow time for each person to read it. Then form groups of three or four. Have each group discuss the questions at the end of the interview. Reconvene for the last 20 minutes and have the groups share their comments.
- ◆ 9–9:45 P.M. **Bible Study:** Close the evening with “What Can I Tell People at Church?” the Bible study on page 3. Photocopy and pass out the study, or use the handout as your notes.

### Saturday Morning

- ◆ 9–9:45 A.M. **Devotional:** Set the tone for the day by handing out (or presenting) “When Gossip Is Good” (p. 10). Discuss the questions at the bottom of the page, and have a time of prayer.
- ◆ 10–10:45 A.M. **How-to:** Use the how-to article “When You’ve Said Something You Shouldn’t Have” on page 14 to learn what to do when you’ve spread gossip.
- ◆ 11–11:45 A.M. **Assessment:** Hand out “Keys to Confidentiality,” the assessment on page 7, to each participant. Complete the assessment as a group, and discuss ways to improve the confidentiality of your church.
- ◆ NOON. Lunch.

### Saturday Afternoon

- ◆ 1–2 P.M. **Final Group Session:** Close the retreat with the case study “When Keeping Quiet Hurts” on page 9. Then pray together, asking God for guidance and wisdom.

You can create similar retreat plans for this BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS theme. Simply determine what you want to accomplish and select the handouts that support your objectives.