

In Wake of Recent Sex Scandals, Do Churches Actually Discipline Members?

When former Alabama Gov. Robert Bentley was accused last year of using public funds to cover up an affair with one of his aides, he ran afoul of the law.

Then he may have also gotten in trouble at church.

The former governor and the aide—also a church member—left their church after details of their relationship became public. Court documents claim both were asked to leave the church.

The church's pastor refused to discuss church discipline with the press. He did confirm last year that the two were no longer part of the church.

If the church asked Bentley to leave, his case would be fairly rare. Few churches have disciplined their members for misconduct, according to a new study from Nashville-based LifeWay Research.

More than 8 in 10 Protestant senior pastors say their church has not disciplined a member in the past year. More than half say they don't know of a case when someone has been disciplined.

"It's one of the topics that churches rarely talk about," said Scott McConnell, executive director of LifeWay Research.

Church reprimands few and far between

Two Bible passages in particular deal with the question of church discipline and how to respond to misconduct by church members. In Matthew 18, Jesus tells his followers to go to

offenders in private and ask them to mend their ways. If that fails, the passage says to bring one or two witnesses and, if that fails, then bring the matter to the whole church for discipline. The hope is that wrongdoers would repent and be restored.

A similar passage in First Corinthians tells readers not to associate with someone who claims to be a Christian but “is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or verbally abusive, a drunkard or a swindler.”

McConnell says in general, church discipline would apply when offenders refuse to acknowledge their wrongdoing, persist in it or are no longer qualified for leadership.

According to the phone survey of 1,000 Protestant senior pastors, 16 percent of pastors say their church has disciplined a member in the last year. That includes 3 percent in the last month, 5 percent in the last six months and 8 percent in the last year.

More than half (55 percent) say no member has been disciplined during their time as pastor or before their tenure. Twenty-one percent say a member was disciplined three or more years ago. Five percent say there was a case of discipline in the last two years.

Pentecostal (29 percent), Holiness (23 percent) and Baptist pastors (19 percent) are most likely to say a church member was disciplined in the past year. Methodist (4 percent) and Presbyterian/Reformed (9 percent) pastors are less likely.

Overall, about half of evangelical pastors (49 percent) and two-thirds of mainline pastors (67 percent) say they don't know of a case where someone was disciplined at their church.

LifeWay Research also asked pastors about the process of discipline. Few churches say the responsibility for discipline lies solely with the pastor (8 percent), church elders (14

percent), trustees or board members (4 percent) or church deacons (1 percent).

Half (51 percent) say two or more groups must agree. Eighteen percent say there is no formal discipline process.

Pastors of churches of 100 or more attenders (17 percent) are more likely to say elders alone handle discipline than churches with 99 or fewer attenders (11 percent). African-American pastors (21 percent) are more likely than white pastors (6 percent) to say the pastor alone is responsible for church discipline.

Mainline pastors (24 percent) are more likely than evangelical pastors (15 percent) to say their church has no formal discipline policy.

McConnell suspects some churches may have informal discipline processes. And some church members may leave rather than going through church discipline.

Where there is formal discipline, a group of church leaders often must agree for formal discipline to take place. The process is rarely arbitrary.

“There’s some red tape involved for churches,” he said. “It is not easy to be kicked out of a church.”

For more information on this study, visit or view the complete survey report PDF.