
CONFIDENTIALITY STATEMENT

The church is a transformational community, powered by the Holy Spirit, equipping people to live holy lives. That requires the church to be involved not only with teaching and training for godliness, but in walking redemptively with people in their failure and brokenness. As leaders, we welcome the opportunity to help those who are struggling spiritually, emotionally, or relationally ... failure and crisis are our best opportunities for effecting real and lasting changes in the lives of disciples.

That said, the church is not a counseling clinic or a support group or a crisis hot-line. We operate differently. We have different tools and resources to bring to bear.

For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. (2Cor 10:3-5)

First, the church is an organic *community*, not a loose-knit collection of individuals. We are intimately involved with one another, with interwoven responsibilities and roles, and a network of relationships that impact us at many levels. The church does not have the luxury (or the liability) of practicing only “flat,” two-dimensional relationships. While “therapist/client” may be adequate to describe a counseling association, in the church our relationships are multidimensional and encompass friendships, mentoring interactions, brother/sister contacts, ministerial involvement, etc. The principle of “community” means that individual actions have impact on the whole, that what each of us does/says/thinks affects the wider body. Because we are so connected, personal failings and struggles have communal implications. As leaders, our interactions with individuals is seen through the lens of the community.

Second, *accountability* is a necessary dynamic to healthy church life. Again, however, this is a multidimensional thing in the context of the church. Accountability is something we practice with peers, with mentors, with church leaders, and--ultimately--with Christ. And, as Jesus' teaching in Matthew 18 demonstrates, accountability (and the resulting transformation) is more important for church life than confidentiality:

"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. (Mt 18:15-17)

The whole notion of “church discipline” is rooted in the idea that individual members are not free to behave as they please; that personal struggles can (and should) be addressed by the community; that each of us is accountable to (and should be held accountable by) the church as a whole. As leaders, our first responsibility is not to keep others' secrets but to do whatever leads to repentance and change.

Third, the biblical norm for wise and effective decision-making involves a *plurality* rather than the individual.

For lack of guidance a nation falls, but many advisers make victory sure.... Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed.... For waging war you need guidance, and for victory many advisers. (Prov 11:14; 15:22; 24:6)

This was true for Israel as a nation. It was also true for the church. God ordained that churches be governed by several individuals wearing several different hats (elders, evangelists, servants). The benefits of several heads extend also to more personal matters. It is in the context of personal sin and estrangement (the Matthew 18 passage quoted above) that the following words are given:

"I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."
(Mt 18:18-20)

As leaders, we work best and most wisely when we work with the advice and consent of other leaders.

Finally, some of the best resources of the church (prayer, support, similar experiences of other members, mentoring, teaching, etc.) can only be brought to bear when we are permitted to move beyond the bounds of secrecy and confidentiality to recruit resources available in the wider community. *As leaders, we cannot afford to let ourselves be cut off from the most significant resources we have to bring healing and growth.*

The assumption and expectation of absolute confidentiality infringes on each of the above principles. If we cannot speak to others about the struggles and needs of those who come to us, we cannot 1) put the needs of the community first, 2) use the community to affect repentance and change, 3) consult with one another about the best course of action, and 4) use the resources God has given the church to bring healing and growth.

Policy on Confidentiality

As church leaders (elders, staff, counseling volunteers), we welcome and encourage Otter Creek members and friends to come to us with spiritual, emotional, and relational struggles. We want you to know that we will treat your struggles with caring and sensitivity.

However, our commitment to confidentiality has limits that you should be aware of from the outset of any conversation. *Legally*, we have a responsibility to speak to others in authority if we learn that 1) you pose a threat to yourself or others, or 2) there is sexual or physical abuse of a minor (or an elderly person) involved. *Conscientiously*, as leaders of the Otter Creek church we also feel a responsibility to speak to others to ensure that we are providing the kind of care and support that will be in your best interest.

Please understand that, while we will never gossip or speak lightly of any Otter Creek member, we do feel a responsibility to do the following when hurting people come to us for help:

1. We will talk to at least two of our fellow elders or ministers to get their advice and counsel and solicit their prayers. There are situations--when the issues are serious enough and could affect the whole church--when conversations will be shared with the eldership as a whole.
2. When other people at Otter Creek are involved (e.g., when relationships are broken, when there is anger or disappointment, when gossip is involved), we will approach those other people in an effort to get both sides of the story and to foster reconciliation. We will not listen to stories involving others without talking to those people.
3. When we are made aware of a struggle that someone else in the congregation has experienced and overcome, we may well speak to that person and enlist their wisdom and help in dealing with your struggle. The church offers many resources for healing. Keeping your secrets is not our first priority. Helping you find healing is.

We don't want the fear of exposure to keep you from approaching one of us. But neither do we want the promise of absolute confidentiality to tie our hands in offering you our best help. If you have something that cannot be shared with anyone else at Otter Creek, let us help you find a Christian counselor who can and should honor absolute confidentiality. But if you can honor us with your struggle, know that we will work with you--discreetly and carefully--to provide the best help the Otter Creek family has to offer.