

Suggestions for Creating Policy and Practices Regarding Sexuality, Marriage, and Gender in the Local Church

When boards begin to create or update their policy documents, they sometimes hear the response, “We are not a business. We are a church!” Often, this is an emotional response to previous unnecessary, shoddy, or poorly communicated policies.

There has also been a lack of understanding about the difference between a “policy” and a “rule.” Although usually helpful, rules are sometimes created to passively target the behaviour of one or two individuals.

A “policy” is a broader guideline or principle that directs decisions and actions within the church by providing a framework that ensures consistency and protection across various situations. A “rule,” on the other hand, is a specific, enforceable directive that defines what is allowed or prohibited. Rules are more detailed and more concrete than policies. Rules are designed to ensure compliance with the principles set by policies. While policies guide behaviour, rules regulate it by setting clear expectations and consequences for non-compliance.

When people negatively react to policy-creation, they are likely reacting to rule-creation. With rules sense an incoming onslaught of “do’s” and “don’ts” in a controlling manner. This is especially true when creating wording around gender and sexuality issues.

Some churches love rules (which are often disguised as policy). These churches usually have signs everywhere. Here are a few that we have seen:

“Please do not make change in the offering plate.”

“Please ask the pastor for permission before making a photocopy.”

“Do not touch the thermostat. Only Robert has the authority to adjust the temperature.”

“Do not adjust volume fader above this line.”

“Remember to flush.”

“Cassettes must be listened to in the library. They cannot be removed from the church.”

Policies **liberate** the church to do ministry biblically. They show us how we will **interact** with each other and with each person who may attend the assembly. Policies also **protect** the church.

But **policies are also pastoral.**

Considering the current social climate regarding gender and sexuality, sometimes, the kindest, most grace-filled thing we can do is to clearly define expectations, beliefs, and consequences. We serve people well when we plainly outline how our church family believes and behaves in loving discipleship-desiring community.

With all of that in mind, let's consider some questions to ask when creating policies, procedures, or practices regarding sexuality, marriage, and gender.

What is the motive for policy related to sexuality and gender?

We create new policies as part of our risk-management strategy and to fulfil our fiduciary duty. Those are healthy and appropriate motives. However, we must be careful that our sub-motives are also pure. Policy is not a weapon. We do not construct policy to draw a line in the sand about an issue, nor should it infer punitive threats or provide a tool to insulate ourselves from facing a group of people we are not quite sure how to serve.

Policy is a poor place to make dogmatic statements. Rather, good policy is a way to create fairness, provide a means of redemption, and allow people to make informed decisions about how (or if) they will belong to a faith community.

Policies are not warm, comfy sweaters that help us feel safe. They are a means of expressing our values, our mission, and our love for people.

Is it biblical, appropriate, and consistent?

In dispensing truth and love, embedded in policy, we must not sacrifice one for the other. We succeed when statements are both thoughtful and truthful.

There is a time to be more vocal about some issues over others, and yet policies, informed by our theology and biblical values, must not simply be a reaction to a new societal trend or threat. Should we be reactionary, we may be misunderstood because we have not been clear about what scripture fully says about a category of sin and temptation. For example, we elevate the sin of homosexual behaviour while missing the truth about broader issues regarding biblical sexuality. We can accidentally make a rule without informing people why the rule exists. We point out a gnat and ignore the camel.

Our policy should be firmly biblical but need not be too loud. Truth doesn't become truer by using more volume or more highlighting. People have been wounded when their particular sin is glaringly spotlighted, while others' sins remain unaddressed in the shadows. We can be hyper-focused on sexuality. The church is non-affirming of any sinful behaviour as described in scripture, including but not limited to hate, anger, murder, jealousy, envy, division, lust, sex outside of marriage, and homosexual behaviour. The church's theological position of non-affirmation is not limited to just sexual sins but encompasses a comprehensive view of all sin as described in the Bible.

We must be careful not to lean into legalism, which focuses solely on rules and regulations rather than the heart behind God's design. The aim is to cultivate a life of holiness and obedience, not mere behaviour compliance.

Is our policy consistent?

Policy and procedure documents are poor locations for soapboxes. Policies must be consistent and fair in terms of directive and tone. They must not be harsh and heavy-handed on some

issues and soft on other issues of similar significance. For example, bluntness about gender issues while gracious about drunkenness reveals an inconsistency in our theology of sin. Being consistent avoids discrimination and the creation of rules or practices that focus on one aspect of sexuality.

Is our policy clear?

Clarity occurs when every policy statement can be linked to the church's mission and the shared values we embrace. For example, we have a policy regarding police checks because we believe in leading children to Jesus and value them as deeply loved persons created by God. Therefore, a strong rule exists because their value is precious.

Policies should state a church's position about some ideal or concept. This creates an obvious connection between the policy and the position. Without a pre-stated position, mission, or value, a policy will feel like a control tactic sprinkled with elitism.

Policies become clearer when they avoid the following:

Presumption. - The readers of the policy will be diverse in experience, age, values, beliefs, and perspective. Everyone is biased. Everyone thinks differently. Therefore, the best policies do not force the reader to "fill in the gaps" in ways that we might assume they will. Someone might say, "I'm gay. Can I be a part of your church?" That statement is understood differently by different people. How we understand "I'm gay" may be understood as attraction, identity, and/or something sexually practiced. A church may be gracious about attraction but non-affirming of practice or a theological stance. Then, "can I be part" becomes complicated. Does "be a part" mean attendance or does it mean "on mission with" or serving in leadership? Like with many concepts, we may be agreeing (or disagreeing) depending on how we understand the definitions and terms.

Insider Language—Clearly define what we mean when we talk with those who are not believers. For example, while we may understand what we mean by "attraction" or "orientation" versus "practice," this division may not be understood or acknowledged as valid by non-Christians. Christians tend to have plenty of colloquialisms, sayings, and jargon. We say things like "hedge of protection" and "travelling mercies." This habit should be avoided for the sake of clarity.

Wordiness - Wordiness in policy can create confusion and make it harder to understand. Complex language can lead to misinterpretation, inconsistent application, or noncompliance. Clear, concise policies are easier to read and follow, improving their effectiveness. Simple language ensures better communication and successful implementation. Often, policies can serve people well when parts of the policies are highlighted, made into an infographic, or similar.

Vague Explanation of Consequence - Readers should be able to understand exactly what will or will not happen should policy be disregarded. When we fail to make the stakes apparent, policies risk being ignored, misinterpreted, or undervalued.

Should it be in policy?

We do not usually have written policies on murder. Our policy around murder is usually covered in statement of beliefs and society, is generally in agreement that murder is unacceptable, so it doesn't need its own section.

Sometimes regulations or rules should just be teaching points and not documents. Written words may reduce risk, but they also may increase risk. We are bound to what we publish.

In addition, when policy documents have too many sections and address too many issues, people understand the policy's intent differently. Not every practice needs a policy. Some practices need to live in the overall operational culture of a faith community without being emphatically stated.

Making another policy solely focused on not harassing someone who embraces a non-biblical standard related to sexuality and gender may be discrimination. We simply need to live out our biblical value of treating everyone with dignity and respect and grow in our awareness of how we can fail to do so sometimes.

With sexuality and gender policy, we must say something, but we must not say everything.

Is it hopeful?

Does the policy point to the redemption and restoration available through Jesus? Is it consistently grace-filled? Is it humble, acknowledging that we all need the Saviour? Does it acknowledge the pain, struggle, and suffering that exist in the human experience? Does it show that we believe in the best in people and want to serve them to that end? Does it highlight Jesus as the answer to the human condition? Is it kind? Does it exhibit our values of forgiveness, growth, and miraculous transformation - especially for those who struggle with sexuality issues?

Is it next-generation friendly?

We tend to create policies and procedures through the lens of mature adults. Yet, when it comes to gender and sex, much of the debate and discomfort pops up in the teenage world. Teenagers may not care about the policy on building use or board elections, but they will be observant on this particular issue.

Engaging some mature and godly teenagers and young adults in policy development may help communicate expectations in helpful language and tone.

Can it be accessed?

A secret policy that is then revealed in moments of tension as a "trump card" is highly ineffective and will frustrate people. Instead, policy should be communicated, discussed, and highlighted. It should be taught.

Caution: When it becomes necessary to communicate the implications of a church policy to an individual in the local faith community, it is best to do so in person. Face-to-face conversations allow for softer interaction and deeper communication of value, dignity, and respect for the person rather than simply stating the position of the church.

Can ancillary documents be created neatly from it?

Because policies are meant to be concise and clear, the “heavy lifting” of policy management can be done by creating other documents that complement the policy's purposes. These may include employment agreements, behaviour agreements, membership forms, volunteer applications, wedding applications, building use applications, and the like. Creating secondary documents is easier when built from the framework of the overarching policy.

Wrapping It Up

Good policy protects churches from the inevitable legal attacks from those seek to harm rather than to become disciples of Christ. Yet, policies serve as grace points. When ministering to those whose ideologies about marriage, sex, and gender differ from ours, good policies allow churches to be preventative rather than reactionary. We become thoughtful and articulate in responses rather than stammering out underdeveloped sound bites or colloquialisms. Good documents may indeed help move ourselves and others closer to Jesus.

Creating thoughtful, clear, and biblically grounded policies surrounding sexuality, marriage, and gender is not just about protecting the church; it is about embodying the grace, truth, and love of Christ in every aspect of church life. Well-crafted policies reflect a church's mission and values, guiding behaviour with wisdom and compassion while fostering a welcoming environment. Ultimately, our policies should point people to Jesus, offering a path to redemption and transformation and ensuring that our actions align with our calling as a community of believers.