

Off the pedestal: Speaking the truth fearlessly yet tenderly

From the Editors in the [November 28, 2006](#) issue

Ted Haggard built up a 14,000-member Pentecostal church on the basis of his charismatic gifts and organizational skills. As one of the country's most prominent pastors and as president of the National Association of Evangelicals, Haggard had access to the White House and was a consultant to presidential adviser Karl Rove. Heady stuff, indeed—until it came crashing down. He was forced to resign as pastor and NAE president after being accused by a gay male prostitute of engaging in monthly trysts enhanced by methamphetamine.

One of Haggard's friends and colleagues said that while Haggard had to repent of his sins, his congregation also needed to repent—repent of the tendency to put leaders on a pedestal.

Charles Chandler, who runs Ministering to Ministers, a support group for ousted ministers, told the *Los Angeles Times* (November 5) that one of the hazards for pastors at megachurches like Haggard's New Life Church is that they are treated almost like rock stars, with their photos and books on display everywhere. "People almost put you on a throne. You're vulnerable when that happens. You can take yourself too seriously."

Such pastors are under tremendous pressure to live as if they belong on that pedestal, and they may turn to sexual or chemical addictions to deal with the pressure, Chandler said—even as they preach all the more vehemently against such addictions.

The Haggard case underscores the importance of congregations being part of a structure that holds pastors accountable and that has a process of disciplining leaders and a means of ministering to wounded parishioners.

Commendably, Haggard's church has an external board that intervened to discipline him once the allegations came out. But what might congregational leaders have

done in advance to forestall his fall? Did Haggard have any confidants with whom he could share his deepest concerns before he fell into the activities that led to his public disgrace?

Pastors and other church leaders need spiritual friends or even spiritual-direction groups with whom they can share their deepest thoughts, temptations and feelings of loneliness—and talk about how well they are handling these. They need people who can look them in the eye, fearlessly yet tenderly, and ask whether they are being honest in their relationship with their spouse and family, in their use of money, and in their exercise of pastoral power.

Of all the people Haggard fooled, he may have fooled himself the most—about his sexuality, about his intimacy needs, about his vulnerability as a leader. No doubt he confessed his sins to God many times. But as Dietrich Bonhoeffer observed, when we confess our sins to God alone we can easily delude ourselves into thinking we have adequately dealt with them. Only when we confess our sins to another brother or sister in the presence of God are the hidden secrets of our lives brought into the light of day.