

The Crisis Playbook

The first 72 hours when a senior leader's moral failure becomes known.

Formation must match responsibility.

BEFORE YOU OPEN THIS PLAYBOOK

If you are reading this because a crisis has just broken, breathe first. You are not alone. Crisis routes through this playbook into human hands — an external covering, a trained pastoral counselor, legal counsel where required, and the Father whose presence does not depart even when the church has failed its people.

This playbook is free and will remain free. The Crisis Playbook and the Discernment Worksheet are the first responders of the Post-Failure Framework. They do not replace: qualified clinicians, legal counsel, civil authorities (when required), or the external covering your governance should immediately engage. They provide the protocol that keeps the first hours from drifting into the default that almost always harms the harmed.

The framework is biblically anchored, trauma-informed, and formation-first. It refuses the corporate crisis-management playbook: brand protection, speed, NDAs, quick re-platforming. It puts truth, repair, and the harmed at the center.

HOUR 0 — WHAT JUST HAPPENED

A senior leader's moral failure has become known. Before anything else, three honest clarifications:

Is anyone in immediate danger? If yes, your first call is 911 and appropriate child- or adult-protective services. Everything else waits.

Is this criminal? Abuse of minors or vulnerable adults, financial fraud, sexual assault, cover-ups — these require mandated reporting to civil authorities. This is non-negotiable. Call your attorney, then make the reports. Do not delay to “gather facts.”

Who is about to be harmed next? Survivors. Their disclosure must be received with belief-first language. The leader's family. Staff. The congregation's trust. Make a list, in that order.

HOURS 0–12 — PROTECTIVE ACTIONS

1. Immediate protective removal. The leader is removed from all pastoral authority, platform, and access to vulnerable parties. This is not prejudging. It is protecting everyone, including the leader, while the truth is clarified.

2. Engage external covering. Contact at least two external pastors/leaders who are not on your board, not friends of the leader, and whose only interest is faithful process. Denominational leaders, trusted parachurch pastoral bodies, or mature respected voices from partner churches. They become your accountability structure.

3. Pause public communication. No statements, no Sunday announcements, no social media for 12 hours minimum. The first words spoken publicly will echo for years; get them right, not fast.

4. Secure records. Financial records, emails, text threads, any relevant documentation. Not to weaponize, but to preserve truth. Brief your attorney on document retention.

5. Care for survivors first. If the failure involves victims, a trained survivor advocate (GRACE, Diane Langberg Foundation, local trauma-informed counselor) should be engaged within 24 hours. Do not ask

survivors to participate in internal church process before their own stabilization.

6. Tell the leader's spouse and family with care. Before they read it online. In person, with a female pastoral presence if the spouse is female. The spouse is not responsible for the failure; they may become one of its first casualties.

HOURS 12–72 — TRUTH AND FIRST COMMUNICATION

Within 72 hours, two things must happen in this order: truth-telling to the congregation, and engagement of the formal discernment process.

Truth-telling principles.

- Name what happened in honest but pastoral terms.
- Name what is not yet known.
- Name the protective actions already taken.
- Name the covering engaged.
- Do *not* minimize. Do *not* spin. Do *not* speak as though the goal is the leader's quick return.
- Center the harmed. Name them (anonymously if necessary) as the people whose pain the church will prioritize.

Sample opening sentence. “We are carrying a hard truth. On [date], it became clear that [Name] has engaged in [category-appropriate language]. They have been removed from all pastoral authority. We have engaged external covering to lead the discernment of what comes next. Our first priority is the care of those directly harmed.”

What NOT to say.

- “We are all sinners” — true but flattens the specific harm.
- “Please pray for [Leader] and their family” without equally naming survivors.
- “We will do whatever it takes to restore them to ministry.”
- Any legal-sounding or PR-crafted phrasing. The congregation can tell. Do not crowd out the gospel with brand protection.

BEGINNING THE CATEGORY DISCERNMENT

Within the first week, the external covering begins the formal discernment process. The three categories determine the consequence path and the restoration path. Full details are in the companion Discernment Worksheet.

Category 1 — Criminal / Predatory / Exploitative Abuse (minors, vulnerable adults, power-differential), financial fraud, cover-ups. **Permanent disqualification from office.** Full cooperation with civil authorities. Restoration as a Christian may still be possible; restoration to office is not.

Category 2 — Patterned Serious Immorality / Abuse of Power Serial adultery, sustained flock relationships, chronic spiritual abuse, long-term deception. **Strong presumption of long-term or permanent disqualification.** Rare exceptions require multi-year, multi-community discernment.

Category 3 — Serious but Non-Predatory Moral Failure Single adulterous incident (peer-to-peer, no power abuse, disclosed with repentance); serious addiction without exploitation. Removal from office for a significant season. Restoration to fellowship is primary. Restoration to office is not assumed; rigorous ABC + formation discernment required if ever considered.

THE FIVE MOST COMMON MISTAKES

- 1. Speed over truth.** Rushing a public statement so the news cycle can “move on.” The pressure feels external; the cost is internal. The congregation will smell it for years.
- 2. Brand protection disguised as care.** Framing the language to minimize institutional exposure. Every word crafted for legal protection costs pastoral trust.
- 3. Centering the fallen leader.** Making the story about the leader's pain, repentance, or return rather than about the people they harmed.

4. Skipping external covering. Handling discernment entirely in-house because the elders “know the situation.” This is precisely when outside voices are needed.

5. Treating restoration to office as the goal. The goal is truth, repair, and the congregation’s flourishing. Restoration to office is a separate question that may or may not ever be answered yes.

NEXT STEPS

This playbook covers the first 72 hours. The Post-Failure Framework's full four movements continue from here: **Discernment & Disqualification**, **Restoration of People**, and **Succession & Re-Leading**. The next free resource — the Discernment Worksheet — walks you through the formal category determination.

For deeper resources, ongoing support, or cohort training for your elders, contact:

drj@troikaministries.org. Troika walks alongside, at pace, without charging for the core resources.

“The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit.” — Psalm 34:18

*Part of the Post-Failure Leadership & Restoration Framework. Canonized 2026-04-20. Free resource.
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