

Tangled in the Worst of the Web

What Internet porn did to one pastor, his wife, his ministry, their life.

By Christine J. Gardner | posted 2/23/01

Scott was finally alone in his office. After another jam-packed day at the church, he was exhausted but pleased. His hard work was paying off. The youth group was exploding in size, and people said he deserved the credit. Before turning to the stacks of papers and phone messages that demanded his attention, Scott decided he had time for a quick reward. He shut his door and sat down at his computer as it hummed quietly on his desk. I deserve it, he thought. He clutched his mouse, and then—click, click, click—the images of women, posing erotically, smiled back in seeming agreement.

By all appearances, Scott, barely into his 30s, had it all. A popular and energetic youth pastor at the largest church in his denomination, Scott already was in demand as a speaker and writer all across the country. He was married to Caroline, a beautiful and loving wife, and lived in a comfortable home they shared with their baby girl. Yet somehow, full satisfaction eluded him. Scott—like a small but increasing number of pastors today—was living a part of his life in seductive secrecy: He had become a cybersex addict, and his thirst for Internet pornography seemed unquenchable.

The road to getting caught

Scott's earliest childhood memories include sexually explicit images. When he was 6, Scott found a pornographic magazine tucked away in a board game.

Scott's family—like his father's military career—was more about rules than relationships. That tendency carried over into the family's religious life. For his family, following God meant being faithful churchgoers. As a teenager, Scott decided he could win God's approval just as he had tried to win his father's approval. After failing to excel in athletics or academics, Scott realized he was best at religion. Scott's high-school peers were amazed at a sermon he gave on a church missions trip. His parents were thrilled, as was Scott. "I think that was when I first felt some level of acceptance from them both that felt very significant," Scott says. Still, his immaturity made him an easy target for temptation.

After high school, Scott attended a Christian liberal arts college in a Western state. By day, Scott pursued his preseminary studies. But by night, he drank. "I was pretty wild my first year in school," Scott admits. He and Caroline married in the mid 1980s while still in college, and between a full load of classes and full-time work, they had precious little time to bond. One night on the way home from a college basketball game, Scott and a friend drove by a box apparently discarded in the middle of the road. Curious, they stopped and found it was full of porn magazines. They took it home and, as a joke, told their wives they had bought the magazines. When the joke was played out, they tossed the box into the trash.

But unbeknownst to each other (until years later), they each quietly returned to the trash bin that night to sneak another look. Scott prayed for God's forgiveness and threw the magazines back in the trash; he thought porn was out of his life forever.

After his graduation, Scott's career took off at a large church in the Plains. But his marriage was in deep trouble. Instead of dealing with their isolation, excessive work, and lack of communication, the couple threw themselves into ministry. "We would work 80, 90 hours a week, and that was our escape from each other," he says.

The couple gradually realized they needed help, but they avoided seeing a professional until the early 1990s, when they agreed to visit a Christian counselor. At their second session, the counselor said their problems stemmed from a poor sex life. He then showed them a sex video. Instead of saving a marriage, the counselor unwittingly reignited a smoldering temptation inside Scott. Within weeks, Scott was using porn again. "I rationalized," he says, "I made all the excuses: 'God, look at all these things I'm doing for you, working with all of these teenagers. Look, I deserve to have this. ... because I have a wife who doesn't care.' "

Porn was slowly taking over Scott's life. The next year, Scott moved from fantasy to reality. He had what he calls a nonsexual affair with a female lay leader in his church. He eventually broke off the relationship. Fearful of the truth coming out, Scott took a new job as the youth pastor of a small church on the Gulf Coast. But his porn use increased.

Sometimes he would close the door to his church office and masturbate to the seductive images on his computer screen.

Within the year, the couple moved back to the Plains so Scott could take a position at a large church in another denomination. Outwardly, it appeared they were moving to be near Scott's mother, who was dying of cancer. But Scott insists the real reason was pride. "At that point in my life, I was so arrogant and so prideful and so committed to the image I had of myself that we went back, because we couldn't stand being at a small church. We wanted to be in the limelight again." Scott was soon booked to speak across the country for months.

By the late 1990s, Scott's porn use had become addictive, controlling much of his time and thoughts. "I had gotten to the place where I stopped asking God to forgive me," Scott says. "I almost felt like I deserved it. I would write a sermon and shut my door and pull up pornography on the Internet in my office." Porn became the escape from his overly demanding job and troubled marriage. "It was a safe place. I was not going to be rejected. I was not going to be hurt. It was a place where I found fulfillment, where I never found fulfillment anywhere else." Porn became Scott's easy answer for intimacy: a false feeling of acceptance without the commitment or the physical risks of catching a disease or getting someone pregnant.

After years of his chronic porn use amid deep marital problems, Scott's double lifestyle reached a crisis: About four years ago, he got caught. Scott was speaking at a large retreat for Christian youth. He felt a compulsive attraction to a college coed from another church. In private with her for a few moments, he touched her inappropriately. Before the retreat was over, the student told her church group what had happened. "Everything hit the fan," Scott says. "It was really ugly."

Scott went home and told his wife everything, from the retreat incident to his years of porn addiction. Caroline, though fully aware of their marital problems, was completely unaware of his porn addiction. She was devastated.

Porn addiction by the numbers

Pornography use—specifically Internet pornography use—is on the rise and it is claiming a high price: lost jobs, failed marriages, and destroyed families. Pastors are no less vulnerable to this addiction. The number of pastors becoming tangled in the Web is growing.

In August 1999, 11 percent of the calls received on Focus on the Family's Pastoral Care Line were about pastors and online porn. In August 2000, online porn worries prompted 20 percent of the calls.

The temptation may be old, but the technology is new. With an increasing number of computers and Internet access in each home, pornography is just a click away, as convenient as ordering flowers or sending e-mail.

In August 2000, *Christianity Today* conducted an exclusive survey of its readership—both laity and clergy—on the issue of Internet pornography. For the majority of respondents, Internet pornography is not a problem. But the responses of a significant few are revealing:

- Though more than half the respondents—67 percent of clergy and 64 percent of laity—have not visited a sexually explicit Web site, a significant number of respondents—33 percent of clergy and 36 percent of laity—say they have.
- Of those who have visited sexually explicit Web sites, just over half of the clergy (53 percent) say they have visited the sites a few times in the past year, compared to 44 percent of lay readers. A total of 18 percent of clergy said they visit sexually explicit Web sites between a couple of times a month and more than once a week.
- Clergy may be more reluctant to tell their spouses about their Internet pornography use. Of those who have visited sexually explicit Web sites, 50 percent of laity said their spouses know about their Web porn use. Only 28 percent of clergy responded that their spouses know. Among the clergy who use Internet porn, 30 percent do not talk to anyone about their behavior.
- Prayer is the first line of defense. Of those who have visited sexually explicit Web sites, about two-thirds of respondents say they have prayed about this area of their lives (69 percent of clergy and 60 percent of laity). Very few have sought professional help (4 percent of clergy and 7 percent of laity).

Repeated Internet pornography use becomes an addiction when the user becomes obsessed with the behavior, spending large amounts of time online, even in the face of personal and professional consequences. So says Jennifer Schneider, an addiction medicine specialist and author of the forthcoming book, *Cybersex Exposed: Recognizing the Obsession* (Hazelden, April).

Men are not the only ones vulnerable. Just under 10 percent of the calls about sexual addiction on Focus on the Family's Pastoral Care Line are from women, some of whom are pastors. Many female sex addicts get hooked through X-rated chatrooms. But younger women are increasingly attracted to pornographic imagery, says Glenn Robitaille, founder and president of the Barnabus Christian Counseling Network, which provides sexual addiction counseling over the Web (www.barnabus.com).

While much attention is focusing on protecting children from porn, the real problem may be with adults. As many as 20 million adults visit cybersex sites each month, according to a study published last year in the journal *Sexual Addiction and Compulsivity*. Based on an online survey of more than 9,000 adults, the study projects that at least 200,000 of all Web porn users are "cybersex compulsives," spending more than 11 hours viewing Web porn each week. During January 2000, the top cybersex site had more "unique visitors" than espn.com, cdnow.com, or barnesandnoble.com. Pornography is one of the most profitable ventures on the Internet. Online porn revenues increased from \$52 million in 1996 to more than \$2 billion by 1999, according to *Obscene Profits: The Entrepreneurs of Pornography in the Cyber Age* (Routledge, 2000). Another study estimates cybersex sales took in \$1.4 billion in 1999, nearly the same as online book purchases (\$1.3 billion), but significantly more than online air-travel revenue (under \$800 million), according to Forrester Research and U.S. News & World Report. Some in the wireless industry hope pornography and the corresponding ad rates it commands will do for that industry what pornography has done for e-commerce. New services allow owners of handheld computing devices to download erotic stories and photos.

Why pastors are at risk

Psychologists say online porn's accessibility, anonymity, and affordability (the three A's of cybersex) all play a role in hooking an individual. Some pastors who would never dream of visiting an adult bookstore or renting explicit videos are downloading images and watching live streaming video from the privacy of their homes or offices. Experts say pastors—who, like many in positions of leadership, are isolated, under pressure to lead exemplary moral lives, and subject to intense on-the-job emotional stress—are at greater risk to become addicted to porn.

Peer accountability can be difficult to find. "The pastor really feels that he doesn't have a whole lot of meaningful relationships because of the expectation that he is going to be serving the needs of everyone else," says Steve Watters, an Internet research analyst with Focus on the Family and manager of the Pure Intimacy Web site (www.pureintimacy.org).

Church members all too often put their pastor on a pedestal as the perfect example of a godly man, says Harry Schaumburg, director of Stone Gate Resources, a counseling retreat center in Colorado for Christian leaders struggling with sexual addiction (www.stonegateresources.com). "When you are only on stage being applauded, you are not really seen for who you are," Schaumburg says. "You don't have the same struggles. And that's part of the isolation."

Another risk factor for pastors and other leaders: The demands of their work put tremendous strains on marriages. Cybersex can temporarily fill a void in their lives, but it is only a "false intimacy," Schaumburg says. About half of the clients Schaumburg treats are pastors struggling with cybersex addiction. Schaumburg says porn use often may be justified as an entitlement. "In our Christian life as well as our American life, we have basically developed a concept that says we can have what we want," he says. "It's a sense that God will bless your life. If you devote yourself to God, God will bless you. We have a right, almost, to get what we want."

For Scott, porn use seemed to dull a very deep disappointment in his relationship with his wife and with God. He says he did not feel loved. "In my own self-centeredness, in my own wickedness, in my own evil heart, I decided that I was going to get what I wanted independent of God," he says.

Rationalization is common. In the CT survey, 69 percent of pastors who had visited sexually explicit Web sites said they started using Web porn out of curiosity. Pastors say they need to see for themselves what other people are struggling with, says Focus on the Family's Watters. They rationalize repeat visits to porn sites as a means to enhance their outreach to others trapped in cybersex addiction, but they end up getting trapped themselves.

Some temptation, though, comes unsolicited. Steve Lane, a former pornography producer who now has a ministry to sex addicts, says he had friends who would build pornography Web sites, then go to religious Web sites to pick up e-mail addresses. One click on the unknown Web site link in the text of an unsolicited e-mail, and the receiver is taken to a porn site.

An immature understanding of sexuality or a history of childhood sexual abuse can be other risk factors. Scott was sexually molested twice, once at camp and once by one of his father's friends. Though he told his parents, they ignored the problem. He was left alone to deal with his confused sense of sexuality. "There was probably a part of me that felt dirty and unclean, that I wasn't worthy of God's love," he says.

Some cybersex addicts enter pastoral ministry, and other helping professions, as a way to cope with their addiction. Barnabus.com's Glenn Robitaille says in an e-mail interview that they hope "serving God would ease the power of their lust." Another Christian dimension that makes this addiction difficult for pastors: In many churches, sexual dysfunction and sexual sin are rarely discussed publicly. "If you had a pastor get up and admit to his congregation that he struggled with an eating problem and that he was addicted to fried chicken, he would probably find some sympathy or get a chuckle out of it," says Watters. But if the pastor confesses that he has dabbled in Web porn, "more than likely the pastor would get kicked out of the church." The consequences of moral failure are deeply personal and professional. Instead of seeking help for their temptation, pastors may attempt to buy time through secrecy.

First, halting steps to recovery

Scott now realizes that, as important as his confession to Caroline was, it was too much too fast. "I took ten years of marital lies and deceit, a giant backpack full of ugliness, and I pulled it off of my shoulders and slammed it on top of her head," Scott says. He relieved his conscience, he now sees, with little regard for the effect on Caroline. "She was left to deal with the devastation and the ugliness and the reality of what I was telling her."

Caroline blamed herself. "If I would have performed better sexually, or if I would have looked better, or ... I just thought I wasn't perfect enough and that's why he was doing these things," she says.

Many times, the spouse of a cybersex addict does not know where to turn for help.

Admission of a moral failure often means the end of a pastor's career and the loss of livelihood. For a woman who defines her role as a pastor's wife, it means the end of her career, too. "I probably would have been willing to trade my marriage for Scott's career and our reputation. Those things were so important to me; that's how self-centered [I was]," Caroline says.

Not only do women blame themselves; sometimes pastors and counselors also impose blame on women. "They get blamed for it: 'If you would be more sexual, submit, have more faith, he would not go outside the marriage,'" says Lynn Wildmon, founder of Esther Ministries (www.estherministries.org), an outreach to wives of sex addicts.

Wildmon knows better, and speaks from firsthand experience. She says her own marriage ended in divorce in large part because of her former husband's sexual addiction. Wildmon says she may receive 50 calls each week from women whose husbands are addicted to porn. In a counseling group of 20 women, she estimates five will be pastor's wives.

Many Christian counselors and medical professionals say a skewed understanding of the biblical concept of submission is common among couples in which the pastor is a cybersex addict. "Submission [is] taken out of context and used in an abusive, demeaning kind of way," Wildmon says. Many wives consider sex merely a duty to their husbands. "They need to remove their husbands from the position of God in their lives," Wildmon says. Submission is a "mutual giving and receiving."

Wives of cybersex addicts wrongly feel responsible to fix their marriage, Wildmon says. Caroline, in fact, was used to fixing problems. Her childhood was turbulent. Her mother divorced and remarried six times. As she had done with her dysfunctional family, Caroline decided to take control of her crumbling marriage: "I adopted the pull-up-your-bootstraps mentality like I had as a child, and I just thought, *Okay, we need to get a formula here to fix this problem.*"

Caroline says she did not consider leaving her husband. "I was very, very angry with him, but I thought, *Oh, we can't ruin his reputation; we can't ruin his career; I don't want to raise my daughter alone, so I've got to find a way to fix this,*" she says. "So that's what I set out to do."

After a sleepless night caused by Scott's confession, the couple told everything to their church's counselor. Uncertain of what to do, he paged the pastor, and Scott told his story again. The pastor, too, was unsure how to handle the news. So the pastor called in the church's 14 staff members and asked Scott to tell his story a third time.

"They started panicking," Scott recalls. Later that day, Scott's pastor came by his house and told him the church was going to pay for him to receive counseling for sexual addiction. The couple packed up their things, dropped their one-year-old daughter off with friends in another state, then made the long drive to Stone Gate Resources in Colorado. Caroline, who was five months pregnant, miscarried during the journey. Scott says, "I can remember very vividly thinking, *Now not only are you an adulterer and a scum and the most evil, wicked person on the planet, but now you're a murderer.* That's how I felt."

Meanwhile, the church told the congregation the couple was on sabbatical. When they returned a few months later, the pastor told Scott there was no way the church could keep him on staff. Scott felt the church was afraid of what this might do to its ministry. "That was something that I think they struggled with greatly," Scott says. "They were not completely forthright when they told the congregation what had happened. They made all the decisions. They didn't want me to be a part of it. So I didn't go and talk to the church or confess to the church or anything along those lines." The denomination that ordained Scott revoked his credentials. "They approached it as a time-out. It was ugly," Scott says.

"I don't think [churches are] really interested in restoration," says Harry Schaumburg of Stone Gate Resources. Churches are more interested in "chaos management," he says. Schaumburg's treatment center includes the Restoration Project, which offers free resources to help churches heal after a pastor's sexual addiction. Fewer than ten churches have used the resources.

Many evangelical denominations handle problems with Internet pornography at the district level, with discipline options ranging from a temporary removal from the pulpit to forced resignation and suspension of pastoral credentials. In one denomination of nearly 13,000 ordained ministers and 5,500 licensed ministers, about 65 ministers lose their credentials each year, a growing number of them because of using online porn.

Personal recovery and restoration from cybersex addiction are not easy. Internet filtering software is not enough. "It's very, very hard to help someone with this problem," says Barnabus.com's Robitaille. "Once you light this fire, it's almost impossible to put out."

Good news is tough news

Other experts are more optimistic but cautious. "The good news is recovery is possible," says Ralph Earle, founder and president of Psychological Counseling Services in Arizona (www.pcsearle.com). "The bad news is it takes work." Earle, a licensed therapist and ordained minister in the United Church of Christ, has treated more than 100 pastors for cybersex addiction.

Most pastors feel they can simply pray their way through the crisis. "It's a very scary thing for a minister to go for help," Earle says. "And most pastors don't go for help until they get into trouble." Robitaille agrees: "People only change when the pain of staying the same is greater than the pain of changing." Some experts say a pastor tangled in Web porn must immediately resign from his position. But others say admitting a cybersex addiction does not need to signal the end of a pastor's ministry, as long as accountability and recovery programs are in place. "For a lot of folks, it has increased their ability to be effective pastors," Earle says.

In some cases, the wife of a cybersex addict may need to leave the marriage if her husband is unwilling to confront his problem, Robitaille says. But it's rare for a porn addict to get free from the addiction without professional help.

Scott's recovery began when he acknowledged his addiction, both privately and publicly. Although Scott's church did not allow a public confession, Scott decided to return to his two previous churches and confess to staff members that he had been living a sinful lifestyle during his ministry there. Later, a colleague privately confessed to Scott that he had engaged in multiple heterosexual and homosexual one-night encounters for years. "For the first time in my life, I looked at another person who is absolutely steeped in sin, and there wasn't a judgmental bone in my body," Scott says. "My heart just broke for him." Scott was able to convince his colleague to seek professional help.

That encounter showed Scott how God could use the ugliness and pain in his life to help others. After bouncing between jobs, Scott was offered a position as an office manager of a church, a position he was reluctant to take. But the regular office hours allowed him time with his wife and daughter in the evenings, a new commitment both he and Caroline had made.

In this new setting, a new ministry began emerging for Scott. On one occasion, someone at the church needed a file from his computer. When Scott went to retrieve the file, he found pornography saved on the computer. He confronted that person, told the pastor, and the church sent the individual to counseling. One by one, people began to seek Scott's help with their hidden sexual addictions, some driving from as far as three hours away. "They knew who I was," Scott says. "I was a safe person now. I was not sitting on a pedestal somewhere." The church opened a counseling center and helped pay for Scott to pursue a doctorate in counseling.

Scott and Caroline are now using the pain of their experience to help other couples free themselves from the snare of Web porn. In April 2000, the couple and their two daughters moved to a Western state. Scott joined the staff of a Christian counseling retreat center. Scott works as a counselor, assisting with the personal and spiritual restoration of sexual addicts.

The work that remains

Caroline's recovery is a difficult and ongoing process. She still inappropriately blames herself sometimes, and from time to time battles feelings of inadequacy. In intimate moments, she sometimes wonders if Scott is thinking of other women he has been with or seen on his computer. Caroline doubts she and Scott will ever go back into youth ministry. "It would be like sending him to a whorehouse, the way that the teens look up to the youth pastor and totally idolize him."

After the couple completed counseling, friends wanted to know if their relationship was "fixed," Caroline says. The solution, she says, is not that simple. "In a strange way, we're hoping that we can always stay broken in a sense, so that we don't lose the desperation for God and for each other."

Getting caught and confessing left Scott's spirit humbled and broken. "It was literally like living with a different man. And so I felt like we had begun a new marriage, a new relationship. I mean everything in our relationship had to change," she says.

But the key to their survival is that Caroline says she was willing to be broken, too. "I think it would have been really easy for me to put a wall around my heart and just say, 'I'm never going to let anybody hurt me this way again. I can't trust you.' Part of our process of healing, I think, was me saying, 'I'm going to love well, no matter what, even if you continue to hurt me.'" Nevertheless, Caroline says she would consider consequences such as separation if her husband ever fell back into his old habits. "I think a key to this was seeing the changes in him, but also not allowing myself to [be protected] from the pain," she says, "being willing to be open and vulnerable as well." Part of being vulnerable includes choosing not to be her husband's pornography police officer. "I decided after our counseling that I didn't want to be his watchdog," Caroline says. "I didn't want to check through his bag every night when he came home to see where he had been or what he'd been looking at. I wanted our relationship to be a barometer of how things were going."

Can she ever trust her husband again? Not completely, Caroline says. "I have to put my trust in God, because he is the only one I can trust completely," she says. "And I don't

think God asks us in this kind of situation to trust our spouse. I think he asks us to love them no matter what they do."

Editor's Note: The names of this pastor and his wife have been changed.

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