

What Missionaries Ought to Know about Pornography

About a decade into the 21st century Josh McDowell sensed that something was distorting our views of morality and the Christian faith. He finally became convinced that a major part of the problem was easy access to pornography through the Internet. As a result the Josh McDowell Ministry commissioned the Barna Group to conduct major research to find out how much pornography has permeated the family, the church, and the culture.

The research involved nearly 3000 people in four surveys during 2015. The surveys included parallel questions relative to age and sample. One survey included 813 people between 13 and 24 years of age in the general USA population. A second survey included 1188 people 25 years of age and older in the USA. The third survey included 432 senior pastors. The final survey included 388 youth pastors. These surveys were given to representative national samples.

General Findings

The report is 160 pages long and includes many findings. Much of the report contrasts practicing Christians with those who make no profession of faith. Practicing Christians are self-identified Christians who agree strongly that their faith is very important in their lives and have attended a church worship service within the past month.

Here are some disturbing findings about the general population.

- 27% of those 25-30 years of age began viewing pornography before puberty.
- 41% of male practicing Christians 13-24 years old seek out porn daily, weekly, or

monthly. In addition 23% of those 25 or over do so as well.

- Those 13-24 ranked not recycling, overeating, and overconsumption of electricity or water as each more immoral than “viewing porn.”
- More than half of all Americans seek out porn at least occasionally.
- Young women who seek porn are more likely than men to be involved in “sexting.” Among women 18-24 69% had received a nude image and 51% had sent one. Among men 57% had received a nude image and 33% had sent one.

Pastors

However, the “Special Report: Pastors & Porn” section is much more relevant to missionaries. One in five youth pastors and one in seven senior pastors use porn. That means that more than 50,000 church leaders in the USA use porn. Missionaries and pastors are both in Christian leadership roles. Pastors lead in their own home cultures, and missionaries lead in their host cultures. We do not know if the use of porn is similar between pastors and missionaries, but since online videos and online pictures are the primary sources of porn for people of all ages, missionaries have at least equal access.

Pastors struggle with porn. Pastors who currently use porn (1 in 7 senior pastors and 1 in 5 youth pastors) checked, “I started viewing porn before puberty.” Among senior pastors 57% are either struggling or have struggled with porn in past (43% in past, 14% currently). Among youth pastors, 64% are either struggling or have struggled in the past (43% in past, 21% currently).

Pastors were asked about the effects of porn in several areas of life. Here are some results for pastors who currently use porn.

I feel guilty when I use porn.

Senior pastors 86% Youth pastors 95%

I feel shame about using porn.

Senior pastors 87% Youth pastors 94%

I am currently trying to stop using porn.

Senior pastors 71% Youth pastors 83%

I tried to stop using it, but couldn't.

Senior pastors 54% Youth pastors 68%

I live in constant fear of being discovered.

Senior pastors 55% Youth pastors 56%

It negatively impacts my ministry.

Senior pastors 64% Youth pastors 75%

It negatively affected my sex life.

Senior pastors 38% Youth pastors 45%

In addition, the study also found that porn also had negative effects on other things, such as relationships and productivity.

Missionaries

No study of this type has been done on missionaries serving cross-culturally; so no one can draw firm conclusions. However, it is extremely unlikely that people ministering in other cultures would be less tempted than those serving in their passport cultures. Missionaries are likely to also experience the same effects: guilt, shame, fear, unable to stop, hindrance to ministry, etc.

Warning signs became obvious about the turn of the century. In a chapter in *Doing Member Care Well* (2002), Ken Williams said, “Once we have begun the slide, sexual temptation will probably be the strongest force we will ever experience. Its power can grow to the point that we become willing to give up everything to gratify it: relationship with Christ, spouse and children, home, ministry, reputation, friends, *everything*. And no

believer is so spiritual that he or she is immune to its power.”

The cover article of the January 2003 issue of *Evangelical Missions Quarterly (EMQ)* was, “The dark side of the Internet.” It was written by two people who had given a presentation at the International Conference on Computing in Missions. The “Techies” of mission agencies were finding evidence of porn on computers in their organizations and they did not know what to do about it: confront the person, report to a superior, or do nothing. Unfortunately, most mission agencies did not follow up on the information. They neither thanked the authors for bringing the subject into the open nor took steps to help their missionaries.

What does the Bible say?

Sexual fantasy is certainly nothing new. While elaborating on the Old Testament commandment against adultery in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, “But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matt. 5:28).

Some people interpret this verse to mean that if they have a passing thought about sex with another person they have committed the sin of adultery. However, both Jesus and Paul used the same word describing themselves. At the Last Supper as Jesus spoke to his disciples he said, “I have strongly desired (lusted?) to eat this Passover with you...” (Luke 22:15). When writing to the Romans Paul said that he would not have known what coveting (lusting?) was “if the law had not said, “Do not covet (lust?).” (Romans 7:7). Thus lusting is more than a passing glance or thought; it is also translated “strongly desired” or “set your desire on.”

People in the porn study were asked to give the reason they search for porn. No matter how the researchers cut the data, the most frequent answer was “for personal arousal.” Here are the results for several cuts.

- By gender: men and women
- By age: 13-17, 18-24, 25-30, 31-50, 51-59
- By marital status: married, all single, never married, single, have been married
- By ethnicity: Black, Hispanic, Asian, White
- By frequency of porn use: daily, weekly, monthly, less often

The most frequent answer for all of these was the same, “for personal arousal.”

Even if it was not sinful in God’s sight, viewing porn can be devastating to relationships and may lead to divorce, breaking engagements, and stopping dating. At best it hurts a friend who feels committed.

What can one do?

In 2002 Ken Williams also said, “Involvement in pornography is particularly difficult to overcome. When one has become addicted, that is, compulsively drawn to pornographic images time after time and unable to stop, he/she will need help from a colleague, a support group, or a counselor to overcome the pull. No one makes it alone to recover from addiction. And no believer is so spiritual that he or she is immune to its power.”

Preventing an addiction is much more effective than overcoming it after it occurs. The Barna study asked pastors what they recommended to help people overcome it, and all of these are effective in preventing it. The following five procedures are recommended for prevention.

When asked what resources they recommend to help people overcome porn use,

senior pastors and youth pastors do not agree which are of most help. Here are the percentages of both recommending the top five procedures.

Personal counseling

Senior pastors 71% Youth pastors 76%

Internet monitoring/filtering

Senior pastors 59% Youth pastors 79%

Accountability groups

Senior pastors 52% Youth pastors 72%

Mentors

Senior pastors 45% Youth pastors 82%

Topic-specific Bible study

Senior pastors 24% Youth pastors 45%

Both senior pastors and youth pastors recommended Internet monitoring/filtering and accountability groups. Covenant Eyes (www.covenanteyes.com) includes both the filtering and accountability, and the study included a special report on how much the combination improves the capacity not to seek out porn.

Covenant Eyes is software that not only filters sites individuals can visit and videos people can watch, but also it sends a chosen accountability partner an email list of similar things a person accesses. Unlike many free filters, one cannot turn it off or uninstall the software without the accountability partner getting notice.

The research found that among adults 25 and over, no matter how often they sought out porn, those with Covenant eyes were less likely to access porn. In fact, 37% never sought it out at all.

The old saying, “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure” really is true. The more individuals seek porn, the more likely they are to find it. Soon they find themselves wanting more but not liking it more. They then move from “regular” to more deviant and cruel images and videos.

Ronald Koteskey
Member Care Consultant
GO InterNational

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Ronald Koteskey
122 Lowry Lane
Wilmore, KY 40390

Phone: (859) 858-3436

e-mail: ron@missionarycare.com

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