

Sex Offenders and Church Attendance

The Christian church is unique in that, based on the uncompromising message of the gospel, it opens its doors to all. It has also been known for some time that a significant number of sexual offenders living in the community also attend church. This may come as a surprise to some, a shock to others, and it is likely to stir up all sorts of feelings and strong opinions. On a personal level if you are told, or you find out, that a sexual offender has joined or plans to join your church, what is your reaction and what should you do to ensure others, (children and adults) who also attend your church are protected? This booklet attempts to answer some of these dilemmas and includes comments from a pastor and a sexual offender ('D') in this situation.

How do I feel?

It is perfectly understandable to be fearful, panicky or, at the very least, apprehensive. Perhaps you feel angry at the thought that someone who has abused children or adults should even be allowed back into the community. There are probably others in your church that, if they knew, would feel exactly the same. Whilst it is important to acknowledge your feelings, any information you have concerning an offender should only be shared on a 'need to know' basis with the leadership in the church who are responsible for ensuring that appropriate safeguards are in place.

What do you mean by 'sexual offender'?

A sexual offender is someone who has committed sexual offences against either children or adults. In this guide we are primarily referring to people who have offended against children or vulnerable adults. Sexual offences include rape, indecent assault and indecent exposure, exposing children to pornography, and encouraging children to perform sexual acts on themselves, other children or the offender. They also include looking at images of children being abused or photographed in provocative poses. These are called indecent images of children (IIOC).

A number of sexual offenders will have downloaded child abuse images. Others will have made these images, or distributed them to others as well as possessing them. Whilst some offenders will also have gone on to 'hands-on' offending, others may gather large collections of images on their computer. These offences are often described as 'child pornography' but this is inaccurate as every image captures an actual situation where a child has been abused, therefore a more appropriate term is indecent images of children (IIOC).

Some sexual offenders target children at a specific stage of sexual development. Others do not discriminate in this way, and may also target adults who they see as vulnerable in some way. Most target children of a particular gender, but some target both.

Most offenders “groom” victims by forming a friendship with them, giving gifts, praise etc. so that the child or adult is comfortable in their presence and trusts them. They also groom parents, carers and others in the community to gain their confidence that it is alright for them to be around their family. This grooming is very subtle and is usually more recognisable by outsiders than by those being groomed. Lone parent families, as well as children from low income families, are often targeted. Most people think of a sexual offender as a lone adult male because this is the image frequently portrayed by the media. Such offenders actually represent between a third and a half of the total. A significant number of allegations of sexual crimes are against other children and young people (between a quarter and a third). Allegations against women account for up to a quarter and groups of offenders a similar amount also.

It needs to be borne in mind that offences are often not reported. However, thirtyone:eight have dealt with serious cases of abuse referred by churches relating to all these different types of offenders.

Whilst most abuse of children happens in families, it is important to realise that children of any age may be at risk of abuse by an offender who is part of your church. You should not therefore be complacent about the risks to a child whatever their age and never assume that because, as far as you know, the offender abused younger children they would be safe with an older age group. Any safeguards must be applied across the board! We also know that abuse of adults can be by family members, by carers within the home or within care homes or hospitals.

What are the on-going risks?

Sexual offenders often display addictive or repetitive behaviour towards their victims. For this reason, however repentant a sexual offender may appear to be, there are no cast-iron guarantees that they will not re-offend. Even if the offender has undergone treatment or received prayer ministry, they should not be assumed to be safe.

For some worshipping communities there is sometimes a denial that sexual offenders from within their own culture would frequent their place of worship. The fact that an individual demonstrates they are “Born Again” or is “Spirit-filled” is often the only requirement to place them within a position of trust within that community. Sexual offenders are present in all cultures, regardless of ethnicity and religious affiliation. Therefore, good sense safeguarding policies and procedures

should not be disregarded purely because someone has had a spiritual renewal or experience.

True repentance is a change in thinking and behaviour, to “go and sin no more” so, apart from safeguarding considerations, in support of the repentant offender’s desire not to fall again we should not place them in a position of vulnerability where they could be tempted to re-offend. Sexual offenders need to be regarded in the same way as someone who has an addiction.

Whilst some offenders when arrested feel relief that their offending behaviour has been stopped, many initially refuse to admit that they have committed an offence and may continue to deny their guilt. This denial can be reinforced by family members who cannot accept the facts. (See the thirtyone:eight leaflet “Help.. Someone I care about may be a sex offender”).

Those offenders who represent a risk to children should be monitored closely and strict boundaries placed on their movements and behaviour within the church setting. A small group needs to be told of the situation, a contract written regarding the conditions necessary. There are three options;

- In some parts of church life, for example, morning worship, the offender must be monitored and discreetly supervised.
- Where provision cannot be made to monitor the individual at meetings involving children or adults who are vulnerable, it may be necessary to ensure that such offenders only attend meetings where those who are vulnerable are not present which may mean for the person not to attend morning worship where large numbers of those who are vulnerable may be present.
- Some churches have created a home group with the person specifically in mind and where other members of the group know of the circumstances. It is important that such a group does not include families with children or is held in a house where children reside.

What can we do?

Having described the worst-case scenario, it is possible to help those who accept that what they have done is wrong and want to change. When they leave prison or the criminal court, they may feel:

- Worried about how people will react
- Frightened in case the temptation to re-offend overcomes them
- Guilty and ashamed
- Isolated and lonely.

'D': 'When leaving prison, society doesn't exactly welcome you with open arms. I did have support from friends and family but generally people don't trust ex-offenders. I felt like a second-class citizen'.

Like anyone, an offender wanting to change will need people around them who will love and accept them, offering care and protection with the assurance that God does not reject them. Alongside this, the people supporting the offender will need to:

1. Challenge risky or wrong thinking and behaviour.
2. Not allow themselves to be manipulated.
3. be relied upon to be supportive to help maintain self-control.

We encourage the setting up of Support and Accountability Groups, particularly for high risk offenders, which can provide a group of people not only to share any necessary chaperoning and monitoring of the offender in church, but also provide a context in which they can address and be supported through the issues they face in life. They will be held to account for their thinking and behaviour, develop a range of close relationships with adults and be disciplined, all of which are key to maintaining an offence-free lifestyle and not giving into temptation.

On-going monitoring is essential and it is important that, with changes of staff and leadership over time, knowledge of the offender is passed on to new leaders or staff. It is important that the offender is never placed in a position of trust including leadership, a door welcomer, a leader of worship, a reader or member of a worship band. All these roles suggest that the person is trustworthy and may lead others not to see the risk they may pose.

In every situation a careful assessment needs to be made as to whether the church can safely and adequately work with the person. Seek the help of police and probation in carrying out risk assessments which need to consider the details of offending and subsequent behaviour and attitudes. You will also need to take into account your own church circumstances, accepting the fact that some people will be just too risky and may need to be helped to find another fellowship where the risk to children can be more easily managed.

'D': 'I know I can phone if I'm in trouble. I know they want to help me. These people give up their free time. It's about feeling like a person again, not a number'.

What about boundaries?

Behavioural boundaries need to be put in place. These should help the offender feel secure and less at risk of false accusations. Most importantly, these boundaries will serve to protect children and young people who attend church activities.

- An offender should not be permitted to get close to children or adults who are vulnerable (either physically or emotionally)
- He or she should not sit in the vicinity of children or known vulnerable adults at church or attend house/cell group meetings where there are children in the home.
- An offender should never be allowed to work with children and young people or with adults who are known to be vulnerable
- They should not hold positions of leadership or responsibility where they are seen by others as someone who can be trusted.
- They should not undertake any activity where they might be seen as in a position of trust. e.g., giving books out at the door, greeting people, reading the lesson, leading prayers or a bible study, because those roles are regarded as suitable for those who are trustworthy.

'D': Working to a contract is a helpful and necessary procedure for ex-offenders in the church. It helped me know what I could and couldn't do'.

Pastor: 'In the beginning I found myself policing him, thinking and worrying whether it was going to work. Now, my pastoral team take care of this and I am more relaxed'.

Internet sexual offending includes not only indecent images of children but also online grooming, so helping an offender with online boundaries may also be needed.

See also; thirtyone:eight Practice Guide – Contracts and Agreements.

What about forgiveness?

An offender needs pastoral care to help them deal with the spiritual and emotional aspects of their life. They may feel that their sins are too awful for God to forgive, that they can never change or be healed of their own hurts. A pastor or carer needs to distinguish between forgiveness by God and forgiveness offered to the offender by those abused.

Offenders do not always appreciate that the consequences of their behaviour can be devastating for the person(s) involved and forgiveness by the victim may take a considerable time. Some may choose not to forgive. Offenders need to know that they have no inherent right to be forgiven by those they have harmed.

An offender may feel that they could never forgive themselves for their actions. In acknowledging they have done wrong they need to know that God forgives them and because of this they can forgive themselves. That is not to say they should forget what has happened and neither should the church. One offender commented

that remembering his offence was a reminder to him to keep certain boundaries so that he would not be tempted to re-offend.

What about confidentiality?

Confidentiality is an important principle in any dealings with people in pastoral situations. However, where safety may be compromised, confidentiality has to take second place to the protection of others. Open communication with the person who has offended and sharing information with the police and probation service are vital for the protection of children and adults who are vulnerable. A church leader may be given confidential information by one of the statutory agencies that cannot be shared with the wider church. However, leaders responsible for children and vulnerable adults can be made aware of any boundaries that are in place without being given details of the offender's history. This is an important distinction; to know the boundaries without the reasons.

What about people who have never been convicted of an offence?

Most people who offend against children are not convicted. We know this by the number of adults admitting to unreported sexual offences against them as children and the number of cases reported to the police actually resulting in a conviction (about 5%). Even if an allegation is reported to the police, most are denied by the accused, and the case generally won't reach court if, for example, there is a lack of corroborative evidence or because it is not in the interests of the child or adult victim to take the matter further. For a case that reaches court, it is necessary for a jury to find someone guilty 'beyond all reasonable doubt'. Unless the jury agree on a verdict, the person will be found not guilty.

Where there are reasonable grounds for concern, churches will still need to respond even if the allegation is denied and in particular by applying appropriate boundaries. Failure to do so could place vulnerable adults and children at risk and it is also in the interests of someone who feels they have been falsely accused to work within given boundaries in order to minimise the possibility of further allegations.

Support for offenders - not an optional extra

Supporting offenders safely in the church is fundamental if others are to be protected from abuse. Safeguarding policies and good working practice are vital. If general procedures are in place and working, spelling out, for example, who has access to the crèche, then sudden changes do not have to be initiated immediately a person with a known problem comes to church. Having said this it is important, as a matter of course, to review policies and procedures on a regular basis, whether or not a known offender joins the church.

We cannot be all things to all people. For example, a church with one meeting room overflowing with children cannot provide appropriately for a high risk offender. In this situation the church could seek the help of another local church who may be in a better position to provide a safer environment. Alternatively, the church may minister to an individual outside of public meetings. For example, in some situations offenders have been restricted to attendance at a particular cell group.

Part of a bigger package

The help and pastoral support available in the church needs to run alongside the monitoring of the individual by police and probation. Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA) exist in all areas. MAPPA places a duty on the police, the probation service and the prison authorities to assess and manage risks posed by offenders in every community in England and Wales. Similar arrangements apply elsewhere in the UK. They do this work in partnership with other agencies including health services, housing, social services etc. Where an offender is subject to a supervision plan it will be vital for churches to work closely with these agencies both in order to reduce risk and also to understand how the church can positively contribute to the supervision plan as well as the offender's relapse prevention or "better life" plan.

MAPPA guidance issued in 2009 by National Offender Management Service (NOMS) Public Protection Unit, Section 6.5, 'Offenders and Worship', stresses that MAPPA should work in partnership with places of worship and "that religious leaders should be provided with sufficient information to protect their congregation" Page 70. The guidance has been updated in 2012, 2014 and 2016. This guidance also says 'Any breaches of the 'contract' with the offender must be reported to the offender/ case manager'. Therefore it is important to contact the police/probation at an early stage and involve them in attending meetings and/or setting the contract where possible.

Further help and resources

The UK has led the world in sexual offending treatment programmes. There are accredited programmes in many prisons as well as community-based services. Research shows that those who complete treatment are less likely to fantasise about children or deny they harmed their victims, and are therefore less likely to re-offend. It is vital that any help provided by the church is not seen as a substitute for working with the statutory agencies. It will also be important in any contract arrangement with an offender to emphasise keeping to agreed programmes and meeting the expectations of supervising agencies. If we are to gain full co-operation from an offender it is important that the Agreement we put in place is discussed and agreed with them, possibly asking them what they think should be

helpfully included, and is proportional to the risk they pose, reflects their pattern of offending and also their needs in terms of pastoral support.

Over the years, thirtyone:eight has pioneered work with sexual offenders in churches. This whole area is dealt with in detail in our safeguarding manual 'Safe and Secure'. It covers all the issues outlined above including working with perpetrators, and the model contract suggested between church and offender has been adopted by a number of mainstream denominations and many individual churches. We will also provide help and support in regard to individual cases which might include meeting with church leadership teams to help them deal with such issues and in some areas deliver direct training in working with sexual offenders in the church context.

Sexual offenders are not born as sexual offenders. Their sexual attraction to children developed mainly through their childhood experiences of abuse, be it emotional, physical, mental or sexual. They are typically people with low self-esteem, emotionally lonely and unable to relate deeply to adults, and who, to quote a probation officer, feel "powerless to change and hopeless". Many are full of shame for their activities, and that sense of shame may actually drive their sexual offending cycle. All of these characteristics, and more we have not mentioned, reflect what has come to be known in some Christian circles as an "orphan heart" and this gives us clues as to how we might fruitfully help them, for all of them are loved by God. The mandate for Christ's life, which we have inherited, was to heal the broken-hearted, set captives free, bring recovery of sight to the blind (self-deceived people?), to proclaim the Lord's favour etc. (Isaiah 61).

Key things to take away

A sexual offender is someone who has committed sexual offences against either children or adults.

Whilst most abuse of children happens in families, it is important to realise that children of any age may be at risk of abuse by an offender who is part of your church.

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Like anyone, an offender wanting to change will need people around them who will love and accept them, offering care and protection with the assurance that God does not reject them.

Supporting offenders safely in the church is fundamental if others are to be protected from abuse.

Thirtyone:eight provides training and advice on all areas of child protection and good working practice to churches, organisations and individuals across the UK as well as a 24 hour helpline service.

The Lucy Faithful Foundation

A national safeguarding agency working with perpetrators of child sexual abuse.

Tel: 01527 591 922

Web: www.lucyfaithfull.org.uk

Circles of Support and Accountability

A Community support system for sexual offenders

Tel: 0118 950 0068

Web: www.circles-uk.org.uk

Stop It Now!

A national campaign that aims to prevent child abuse by encouraging offenders to seek help.

Email: help@stopitnow.org.uk

Web: www.stopitnow.org.uk