

WHAT IF THE ABUSER IS ONE OF US? A Model for Congregational Response

*In thee, O God, I have taken refuge...be a rock of refuge for me,
where I may ever find safety at thy call...*

Psalm 71:1-3

Increasingly, congregations are asking for assistance in responding to situations such as:

- a long-time member of a church has been convicted of child molestation and is in prison; the church is wondering what they need to do in order to be prepared for the member's release;
- a pastor, made aware of the presence of a recently-released child sex offender in the neighborhood, has invited the offender to church and is startled to discover that members of the congregation are disturbed and questioning the pastor's judgement;
- a congregation learns that one of its members is listed on a sex offender site on the Internet; rumors are flying, but no one is willing to seek out facts and explore implications.

The church as a place of hospitality is a deeply held value, and one that provides the impetus for much of our work for justice. Anguish results when this value comes in conflict with other deeply held values, such as the church as sanctuary, as a place of safety. We embrace the Gospel's mandate to protect "the least of these," particularly children and vulnerable adults. We recognize the need for naming versus denial, for saying that sexual abuse is sin and that protecting children must take precedence over any embarrassment or hesitation at confronting realities that may be painful for those who are part of our church community.

In addition to this theological perspective, there are psychological and social factors that are important for churches to consider. Numerous studies in recent years point to an extremely low likelihood that pedophiles can or will change. Without extensive professional treatment, virtually all child sexual offenders will re-offend. Repentance, prayer and pastoral support can be crucial elements when combined with life-long treatment, but, in themselves, they offer little hope of changing the behavior of perpetrators.

Two additional factors may help us stay clear about what must be done in these difficult situations. One is the necessity to focus on behaviors and not on character (*i.e.*, we are not saying the perpetrator is a bad person, but that his or her abusive behaviors are harmful, even sinful, and cannot be tolerated). The other is the knowledge that every congregation has in its membership persons who have been abused, whether by family members or acquaintances or strangers. Their sense of the church as a place where they can heal will be destroyed unless they are assured that safety measures have been put firmly in place for them and their children and for the children of the church and the community.

The presence of a convicted offender in the church community is an exceptional circumstance, and warrants measures that are unusual in a place we treasure in part for its openness and welcome. In the face of likely resistance to a public disclosure, we need to remember that the offender's status is already public, since there has been a conviction.

Secrecy is dangerous, putting potential victims at higher risk. A carefully constructed and openly negotiated covenant between the offender and the church community has the best chance of achieving a “win-win” solution, allowing us to reduce the risk of abuse at the same time we offer the church’s ministry to all who seek it.

Elements of a Congregational Response

Education and awareness

A church that has had regular education and training events on sexual and domestic violence and on child abuse is much better prepared to move quickly on developing procedures when the presence of a convicted offender is made known. At least annually, every congregation should sponsor an adult education series or forum, utilizing the expertise of professional service providers in the community or the excellent denominational and/or ecumenical resources that are available.¹

Child sexual abuse prevention policies and procedures

The General Conference of the United Methodist Church has called on every local church to develop a policy and specific procedures to reduce the risk of child sexual abuse in its ministries and facilities. Some annual conferences have a trained team ready to work with churches on the development of such policies and procedures. A manual, Safe Sanctuaries, outlines steps and offers sample policies and procedures.²

Specific procedures for situation where perpetrator is present:

A convicted sex offender who wishes to be part of a church community, whether one he or she has attended for some time or a new one, should expect to have conditions placed upon his or her participation. This can best be done through the development of a written covenant, signed by the offender and by church officials, preferably by both the pastor and the chairperson of the Church Council (or other administrative body of the church).

The covenant should begin with a clear statement of the role of the church as “sanctuary,” with appropriate Biblical reference(s). Immediately following the theological introduction should be a clear statement to the perpetrator that “abusive behavior is a choice and we care enough about you to hold you accountable for it.” Following are some suggested guidelines, to be adapted or added to as the particular situation merits.

- As part of your growth and penitence, you shall prepare and deliver written acknowledgments and apologies for the pain caused directly or indirectly by your actions. At the very least, you shall address these statements to your victims, their families, your own family and the members and supporters of this church. (Requests for

¹ Contact the Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence for a copy of their excellent and comprehensive catalog of brochures, videos, curriculum and training resources. Phone: 206-634-1903; web site: www.cpsdv.org.

² Melton, Joy Thornburg. Safe Sanctuaries: Reducing the Risk of Child Abuse in the Church. Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 1998. Order for \$15.95 from 1-800-685-4370, item# DR220.

forgiveness shall not be included). This will become part of an open letter to the congregation, informing them of your presence and of the conditions of your participation.

- We expect you to comply fully with all restrictions and requirements placed upon you as a result of any legal actions.
- You shall continually participate in a professional counseling program, specifically addressing your abusive behaviors, for the entire time you participate in this church community. We strongly suggest that you continue such counseling for life.
- You will not accept any leadership or representational position within or on behalf of this church. ☆
- The Church Council will identify at least two "covenant partners" for you. They will be adults, at least one of whom will be of the same gender as yours. They will not be related to you.
- You may participate in worship in the sanctuary and in the adult church school class of your choice. You will use the most direct route from the parking lot to the main entrance to these facilities, not passing through any other parts of the church buildings. At any other time, your sole access to church facilities is limited to the most direct route from the parking lot through the main entrance to the church office only. Any other participation or access will require prior authorization and accompaniment by one of your covenant partners.
- You may not use restroom facilities in the church buildings. Should an emergency arise, you will be responsible for getting one of your covenant partners to accompany you.
- At church-sponsored functions for families, you may attend with, but at no time leave the immediate proximity of, your family or one of your covenant partners.
- At no time shall you deliberately place yourself in or remain in any location in or around the church facilities which would cause undue distress to others. (This guideline prohibits you from being in or near the library, nursery, preschool, elementary, junior high or high school areas of the facilities for any reason whatsoever).
- At least twice each calendar year, and as otherwise requested, you shall meet with and report to the church council regarding your status of adherence to these guidelines.
- If you should decide to relocate your membership (or substantially attend) another congregation, the church council will seek to inform the leadership of that congregation of the conditions of these guidelines.

Before the covenant is finalized, the church's legal counsel should be asked to review it to be sure that it does not put the church at legal risk. The offender should show the document to his or her parole or probation officer, and have that person initial a copy for the file.

Care and healing for the congregation

- Outside professional intervention should be arranged for the congregation, in order to

deal with the range of emotions, dynamics and fallout that will be inevitable. Separate sessions for adults, youth and children are recommended.

- In the midst of dealing with this situation, additional disclosures of past, and possibly current, abuse are almost certain. Church leadership should anticipate this, understand it as a step in the road to healing and be prepared to deal with it.

Conclusion

Any congregation that enters into this type of covenant with a convicted sex offender must take it very seriously. Monitoring of the covenant is a permanent responsibility. After a few years, there may be a tendency to ease the level of vigilance, or even to let the covenant lapse. Everything that is known about child sexual offenders suggests that such a move could put the community's children at immediate risk, as well as leave the offender open to the possibility of false allegations.

Whenever there is a change of church leadership, particularly a pastoral change or a new church council chair, the covenant should be formally renewed, with new signatures. Any changes to the covenant, or revisions of its language, should be discussed thoroughly in and acted upon by the church council. If a covenant partner becomes unavailable, he or she should be immediately replaced by action of the church council. When new members join the church, the covenant should be carefully explained. They will hear about it anyway, and it is far better for it to be dealt with openly, factually and with opportunity for questions and reflection.

Inevitably, some persons will view the conditions of the covenant as too severe and others as too lax, in that it allows the perpetrator to return to the congregation at all. Any tendency to uneasiness at the perceived harshness of the covenant should be balanced by a reminder of the church's primary responsibility to protect children and vulnerable adults. In order to welcome a perpetrator into a church's fellowship, the church can and must say clearly, "These are the conditions of accountability under which you are welcome."

*Peggy Halsey
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The idea of a covenant and some of the guidelines have been adapted with permission from "When the Abuser is Among Us: One Church's Response to a Perpetrator" by Carol J. Adams, printed in Working Together, Volume 14, No. 3, Center for the Prevention of Sexual and Domestic Violence (see footnote 1 for information on contacting the Center).

This document is intended to be a helpful theologically based tool for United Methodist congregations that face the challenge of how to show Christian hospitality to perpetrators of serious sexual abuse, as Jesus would call us to do. It is not intended to and does not set a standard of care for how churches should or should not respond, nor does it provide legal advice. The services of a competent legal advisor always should be sought in connection with these issues. It also does not presume a secular legal duty owed by a church to any persons, nor should it be used to show, establish or prove any duty or standard of care.

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