

Dealing With Registered Sex Offenders

BALANCE YOUR MISSION WITH VIGILANCE

Allowing registered sex offenders to participate in any of your church's worship, educational, and fellowship activities is a difficult decision. While no church has an obligation to accept sex offenders into membership—or even to allow them to attend services—the challenge for many church leaders lies in balancing their mission of compassion with awareness and vigilance.

If your church decides to allow sex offenders to participate in worship and other aspects of your ministry, protecting your congregation and young people should top your list of priorities. Consider the following strategies to help you manage the situation.

DECIDE YOUR CHURCH'S RESPONSE

Develop a policy before a sex offender seeks to attend your church. It should outline how much participation, if any, you will allow sex offenders to have.

An established policy provides clear guidance when a situation arises and helps church members realize the protections in place. An established policy also should help minimize emotional, fear-driven reactions to learning that a sex offender is participating in some church activities.

ASSESS EACH CASE INDIVIDUALLY

Some registered sex offenders are more likely to re-offend than others. Their offenses may range from an adolescent who had consensual sex with an underage girlfriend to a pedophile with a long history of molestation.

Assess each situation individually, staying within the guidelines your church has established. Meet with the offender, his or her probation officer, social worker, and local police to get a better sense of whether or not you should allow the offender to participate, and to what extent.

ESTABLISH PROCEDURES

Manage sex offenders' participation while maintaining accountability and protection for all members, especially

children. Your attorney can help you develop procedures that help manage offender participation and help ensure adequate legal protections for your church.

ESTABLISH A CONTRACT

Ask offenders to sign a contract designed to help them manage their behavior and avoid situations that provide opportunities for further offense. Clearly state your expectations, the amount of participation your church will permit, and the consequences of violating the contract.

To ensure that the sex offender receives appropriate guidance and to help your church assess potential risks, you may want to establish regular counseling sessions with the pastor, other church leaders, or with an outside counselor. The contract also should include permission to convey information about the offender's conviction to others in the congregation if you believe that will be necessary.

ASSIGN ACCOUNTABILITY PARTNERS

Assign a responsible, pre-screened member of the congregation to act as an accountability partner to continually monitor the activities of a registered sex offender while at church. Accountability partners should always keep offenders in sight while they are at church.

Offenders also should be required to call their accountability partner before coming to church so they can be met in the parking area and accompanied during their time at church.

DECIDE WHO NEEDS TO KNOW

Decide early who in your church needs to know that a particular person has a history of sex offenses. As church leaders discuss the presence of sex offenders with others, they should limit any communication to factual statements. Be considerate and circumspect; don't engage in speculation about what might have happened in the past or about future risk.

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Communicating the participation of a registered sex offender should always be done in consultation with appropriate legal counsel. Offenders, as well as victims, have a right to privacy that you are legally bound to respect. Your attorney can help you work through the specific legal requirements of your state.

RESTRICT CONTACT WITH CHILDREN

Your church should have a policy in place requiring a criminal background check for everyone involved in working with children and youth ministries. If not, develop one immediately.

The policy should make clear that any person with a history of sex offenses will not be allowed to work with children or socialize with them in the congregation. Offenders should never be allowed in or near a church nursery or children’s ministry area.

WORK WITH HELPING AGENCIES

Frequently, churches can’t single-handedly assess the risk that a sex offender will re-offend. Early in your conversations with sex offenders, ask for permission to call probation officers, counselors, and others assigned to work with them. These professionals generally welcome a church’s involvement, and they can be an invaluable resource as you work with offenders.

CONSIDER PARTICIPATION CAREFULLY

The issues involved in allowing registered sex offenders to participate in church activities should not be taken lightly. Working with sex offenders involves a number of precautions that church leaders need to prayerfully balance with the church’s mission of forgiveness, care, and compassion.

Churches often can be instrumental in helping sex offenders return to society and rebuild their lives. As offenders try to restore their relationships and overcome old behaviors, participation in a faith community may be just what it takes to put their lives back on the right course.