

A blurred background image of a person in a blue shirt, possibly a pastor or church member, standing with arms outstretched. The image is out of focus, creating a sense of depth and atmosphere.

Help...

a sex
offender
has joined
my church

CHURCHES' Child Protection
ADVISORY SERVICE

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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 sex 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 sex offender has joined your church, what is your reaction and what should you do to ensure children and vulnerable adults who also attend your church are protected? This leaflet attempts to answer some of these dilemmas and includes comments from a pastor and a sex 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.

Pastor: 'When 'D' told me his story it was the first time I was aware of someone with his background in the church. I was grateful for his honesty, but when someone said the crime wasn't as bad as he thought it was going to be, I firmly responded that a sexual offence is serious however we try to wrap it up'.

What do you mean by 'sex offender'?

A sex offender is someone who commits sexual offences against another person, adult or child. Sexual offences can include crimes such as rape, indecent assault or indecent exposure. Within the context of sexual offences against

children, individuals who target pre-pubescent children are sometimes referred to as paedophiles. They are likely to 'groom' the child to obtain their trust and then introduce them to sexual material and activity, which may range from sexual fondling to rape, anal or oral sex.

Some sexual offenders abuse older children and adolescents. Others will target a wider age group, including vulnerable adults. It is important to realise that children of any age may be at risk of abuse by an offender who joins 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!

What are the on-going risks?

Sexual offending can be extremely addictive and the offender's sex drive so strong that it is not easily turned off. 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. The follow-on from repentance is to 'go and sin no more' so, apart from the vital child protection considerations, it would be irresponsible to place

someone in a position of vulnerability where they would be tempted to re-offend. Sexual offending needs to be approached in the same way as any other addictive behaviour.



Many offenders initially refuse to admit that they have committed an offence and may continue to deny their guilt. This can be reinforced by family members who cannot accept the facts. Some offenders do not accept that their behaviour is wrong and believe it is perfectly acceptable to have sexual relationships with children. Such people continue to be a danger to children because they lack the motivation and will to change. The church cannot be expected to manage this type of offender and it is therefore imperative they are monitored closely and strict boundaries placed on their movements and behaviour within the church setting. This includes making alternative arrangements where provision cannot be made to monitor the individual at meetings involving children.

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, offer care and protection with the assurance that God does not reject them.

Alongside this, the people supporting the offender will need to:

- challenge risky or wrong behaviour
- not allow themselves to be manipulated.
- be relied upon to be supportive to help maintain self-control.

This type of support could be the key motivation for the offender not giving in to temptation. Because of the

addictive nature of sexual offending, on-going monitoring is essential and in every situation a careful assessment needs to be made as to whether the church can safely and adequately work with the person.

'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 (either physically or emotionally)
- An offender should never be allowed to work with children and young people
- He or she should not sit in the vicinity of children at church or attend house/cell group meetings where there are children.
- They should not hold positions of leadership or responsibility where seen by children within the church

because a child is likely to regard them as someone they can trust. The additional stress that leadership brings could also increase the temptation to re-offend.

'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'

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 (where there is repentance) and forgiveness from those the offender has 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 even choose not to forgive.

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 necessarily forget what has happened. One offender commented that remembering was a reminder 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 children's safety may be compromised, confidentiality has to take second place to protecting children. Open communication with the person who has offended and sharing information with the police and probation service is vital for the protection of children. 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 can be made aware of any boundaries that are in place without being given details of the offender's history.

What about people who've 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 reaching the court (about 4%). 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 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 children are to be protected from abuse. Child protection policies and good working practice are vital (see CCPAS child protection manual 'Guidance to Churches'). If general procedures are already in place and working (e.g. 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 dangerous 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 an all-male 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.

"D": Church has helped because of what I had to go through to get to this point. Being around people who are secure, stable and caring has given me a fresh start'.



Further help and resources

The UK has led the world in sex offender 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.

Over the years, CCPAS has pioneered work with sex offenders in churches. This whole area is dealt with in detail in our child protection manual 'Guidance to Churches'. 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. CCPAS, in association with the Faithfull Foundation, have also produced a DVD training programme for churches on understanding and working with sex offenders. We will also provide help and support in regard to individual cases.

Churches' Child Protection Advisory Service - Child protection support, training and policy/practice issues including work with sex offenders.

Tel: 0845 120 4550

Email: info@ccpas.co.uk

Web: www.ccpas.co.uk

Lucy Faithfull Foundation - A national child protection agency working with adult male and female perpetrators of child sexual abuse. Lucy Faithfull Foundation run Circles of Support (see also below).

Tel: 01527 591 922

Web: www.lucyfaithfull.co.uk

Circles of Support and Accountability

- A Community support system for sex offenders.

Tel: 0870 774 6354

Email: helen@quaker.org.uk

Web: www.ccfj.org/what/circles.html

Stop It Now! - A national campaign that aims to prevent child abuse by encouraging offenders to seek help. It also provides adults with information to help protect children.

Helpline: 0808 1000 900

Email: help@stopitnow.org.uk

Web: www.stopitnow.org.uk

NSPCC - A National Child Protection Charity

Helpline: 0808 800 5000

Email: help@nspcc.org.uk

Web: www.nspcc.org.uk

Sanctuary - Training and support to help churches working with child sexual abusers: Tel: 0870 991 1876

Email: info@sanctuaryuk.com

Web: www.sanctuaryuk.com

Other titles in the 'Help' series

Help... something bad happened to me (8-10yrs)

Help... I need someone to talk to (11-18yrs)

Help... someone I care about was abused

Help... my child's been abused - now what?

Help... I was abused as a child

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