

Not in My Pew

Our congregations are places of welcome for all sinners. Or are they? Can we, should we, welcome those who admit to molesting children?

Lyle Lovett, of country music fame, once sang a lyric that ran "God may forgive you, but I don't / That's the difference between me and God." As Christians, we commit ourselves to the idea of forgiveness. Its healing and fellowship are central to our theology. In tune with this belief, we open our churches to those who have committed a variety of crimes: robbery, burglary, arson, even murder. Provided the sinner is truly repentant, he or she is welcomed. But the man who molests children, how can we fellowship with someone who is a danger to our child? Many say that God may forgive, but indeed--I don't.

The crisis of sexual abuse by priests within the Roman Catholic Church highlights the problem among church leaders. The problem, however, also resides in the pew. The frequency of child sexual abuse and the number of persons molesting may be increasing; arguably, reporting may be increasing instead. Undeniably, clergy and church members face an alarmed awareness of sexual abuse in the community--and, by extension, in the church.

The stereotype of the socially awkward, single adult male pedophile (one who prefers sex with children) fits poorly for teenagers, fathers, stepfathers, brothers, uncles, grandfathers, and even women who are now known to molest. Many of these sexual offenders are active in the church. They often lead dual lives, their offenses remaining unknown to the leadership or the lay community. This is particularly true if the abuse was in the distant past, if their crimes have not been reported, and/or if they have managed to avoid detection through the reporting laws now enacted in many states.

Current Treatment

State-of-the-art treatment programs for sexual offenders (including those who abuse children) acknowledge that patterns of sexual gratification are highly resistant to permanent change. Rather, they teach the offender an "early warning system" to allow him to detour from patterns of thought and emotion that commonly lead to sexual offenses.

An important component of virtually all programs is self-monitoring. The offender is expected to constantly survey his environment, avoiding situations that place him at risk to re-offend. Based on the type of offense and history, he may be expected to avoid all contact with children, intimate contact with children, or simply contact with a child without other adults present.

Success rates are difficult to measure. Those who complete counseling can be tracked over a period of months or even years to determine whether they re-offend. However, that determination is usually based on arrests. Offenses that go undetected may occur, and offenders have no reason to admit to them.

No Universal Answer

What of the psychological makeup of these (still predominantly) men? Are they without conscience, experiencing no remorse for the trauma they cause? Is their sexual behavior out of control? There is no universal answer to these questions. In my work as a clinical psychologist, I have met people who appear incapable of understanding the pain they inflict and report an

inability to control their behavior. Often, these are offenders who actively search for victims, developing relationships solely for the purpose of a sexual encounter.

Still others are racked by guilt and suffer anguish over the pain they have caused. Often, these are offenders with very few victims, usually children or young teens with whom there was an established relationship.

We speak of "sexual offenders" or "child molesters" as if a criminal label adequately describes all who fall into the category. A similar example is the criminal label "murderer." The latter term describes anyone from a serial killer such as Ted Bundy to a young man who unintentionally killed a friend in a drunken argument. Likewise, the term "child molester" describes anyone from a man who boasts of the sexual abuse of hundreds of children to a great-grandfather who admitted, well into his 80s and with anguish over the deed, that he had molested his daughter on one occasion when she was a teenager.

It is those who experience genuine remorse for their behavior, those who empathize with their victims, for whom there seems to be a spiritual as well as emotional longing for peace. They desire to mend a relationship with God, sometimes turning to a belief system lost since childhood. However, they face the scrutiny and fear of Christians and the community at large. If attending a church, they may be careful to hide their identities.

One offender served five years in a notorious Indiana prison. He freely acknowledged his guilt, pled guilty in court to the crime, and received mandatory counseling while incarcerated. Upon his release, he returned to the church in which he had been a lifetime member. He was told flatly that, because of his crime, he was no longer welcome. Ironically, another member of the same church had also molested a child; because the abuse had never been reported and was unknown except to his victim, he continued an unblemished membership there.

As Christians, we are called to reach out to a hurting world. Yet, we cannot simply welcome the sex offender without considering potential risks. The boundary of sex with children, once crossed, is a difficult boundary to rebuild. Most crimes and sins that erode the morality of the church occur outside its walls. Child sexual abuse, however, can occur within its walls as well as without. It appears that churches have little experience in creating and maintaining expectations for adult behavior within the church and monitoring those expectations on an ongoing basis. Yet, such a system of expectations and monitoring are required if the vulnerable are to be served.

Global Issues

What is an appropriate response to sex offenders? How can the church minister to these pariahs in our society and at the same time protect the potential victims for whom it is responsible? The individual circumstances of the offender, the church, the community, and a host of other variables make a single model of church response impractical. However, several global issues are present for the leadership and members of any church considering this problem:

1. Are sex offenders welcome? In an ideal world, the church should be open to anyone seeking a relationship with Christ. In reality, anger and fear can compromise the openness of the church's response. If the leadership and members do not feel comfortable in fellowship with those who are by history sexual offenders, it may be appropriate to pursue a period of discussion and prayer before opening the doors to this complex issue.

2. Does the church tolerate or accept sexual offenders? The church is repeatedly required to tolerate behavior from members that it might prefer did not occur, including cohabitation, divorce, premarital sex, drug use, and extramarital involvement. How would a history of sexual offending be perceived--as a sin in the past, forgiven and forgotten, or as a pattern of behavior that may occur again? If a pattern of behavior, what expectations would the church place on the member who has committed a sexual offense?

3. What are the concerns of victims and survivors of sexual abuse who are leaders and members in the church? Beyond moral issues, some may experience a reawakening of painful memories and emotions of past trauma if a known sex offender attends. These members and attendees, as much as the offender, need to feel a sense of safety.

4. Does the offender have a treatment plan or program? Sex offenders with a history of counseling should have a plan in place to maintain a safety zone for themselves and those who might be at risk. It may be necessary for the church leadership to work with local counselors who provide sex offender treatment, or with the sex offender himself, to determine the implementation of this safety zone in the context of the church.

5. What level of awareness should the church maintain? Should the minister(s), staff, key lay leadership, or the entire church be aware that a sex offender is present? The perceived need for safety of children will preclude the possibility of keeping the matter in confidence, even if such privacy is intended. Having additional people with an awareness of the situation should help the offender maintain his "safety zone."

6. How would the church respond if a current member or leader were accused, or acknowledged a history of sexual offense(s)? What expectations for behavior, counseling, repentance, or involvement in the church community would be developed?

The issue of sexual abuse is very real and very present in the church. Known or unknown, many, many churches actively minister to sex offenders. The crime is so heinous, so revolting, that the offender is often quiet; often no one but he and his victims are aware that the crime ever occurred. Once acknowledged, it is a traumatic and potentially emotionally scarring issue for all who must confront it.

Ironically, the child molester who is known may be less of a danger than the child molester who is unknown, carefully hiding either a painful past secret or a predilection to prey on children. We struggle as Christians to balance our mandate to love the unlovable and to protect the unprotected. There is no simple solution to accomplish both. By failing to confront the issue, however, we simply say, "That's the difference between me and God."

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Sidebar

Resource Listing

<http://www.elca.org/safeplace/>

Establishing Safe Practices

Safe Sanctuaries: Reducing the Risk of Child Abuse in the Church, by Jay Thornburg, Discipleship Resources, 1998, Order #DR220, \$15.95, telephone: (800) 685-4370.

Reducing the Risk of Child Abuse in Your Church kit, Christian Ministry Resources, P.O. Box 2600, Big Sandy, TX 75755, \$49.95 + shipping, telephone: (800) 222-1840.

Educating Children about Appropriate Touch

"Preventing Child Sexual Abuse, a Curriculum for Children Ages Five through Eight," by Kathryn Goering Reid, United Church Press, ISBN# 0-8298-1016-1.

"Preventing Child Sexual Abuse, a Curriculum for Children Ages Nine through Twelve," by Kathryn Goering Reid with Marie M. Fortune, United Church Press, ISBN# 0-8298-0810-8.