

Dealing With SEX

A Tough Topic for Church Leaders

By Laura J. Brown

At some point, you might learn that a sex offender attends your church — or wants to. What will you do?

Offer support if the person is repentant?

Ask the person to leave?

Allow him or her to stay unconditionally and pray nothing happens?

If you do nothing, the offender might be tempted to harm someone else in the church, traumatizing the victim and devastating your ministry. The liability exposure is enormous.

If you ask the person to leave, tough questions about the church's position on forgiveness might follow.

And if you offer support, you'll need to meet the offender's needs, overcome members' objections, and protect vulnerable people in your flock. That's a tall order, but it can be accomplished in many cases with careful thought and preparation.

Not In My Ministry!

If you think this scenario could never happen at your church, think again. Across the country, convicted sex offenders are being released from prison into communities like yours. You can't tell who they are by looking at them. Most offenders are men, but some are women. In fact, a few convicted sex offenders are former ministry or community leaders.

People who've fallen into this type of sin are predisposed to do it again, even after receiving treatment. Studies indicate that sex offenders need both treatment and continuing support from others to help them to manage the thoughts, feelings and situations that led them to commit sex crimes in the past.

More than half a million people in America are listed on sex offender registries. Being placed on a registry can cause offenders to be shunned at every turn, like modern-day lepers. Recovering sex offenders might find it difficult to find acceptance

anywhere outside of a church.

It's only a matter of time before a sex offender seeks help from your ministry. What should you do?

Be Prepared

The best time to decide how you'll handle an issue like this is to develop a church policy before it happens — one that outlines how much, if any, participation you'll allow registered sex offenders to have. Having such a policy might help church members understand the extent and nature of the protections in place. That should help minimize emotional, fear-driven reactions to learning a sex offender is involved with the church, if the situation arises.

If your church decides to allow repentant sex offenders to participate in any aspect of your ministry, you'll want to adopt strategies to carefully manage the situation. Protection of your congregation, its young people and other vulnerable individuals, like the disabled, should top your list of considerations.

Ideally, registered sex offenders would meet with church leaders and the pastor beforehand to request permission to attend. This doesn't always happen. An offender might attend for years before a member discovers the person's background. In any case, churches with an existing policy will be in a much better position than those forced to deal with the situation on the spot.

Educate Yourself

Not all sex offenders are the same. The term "sex offender" covers a wide range of individuals, from the teenager convicted of having sex with his underage girlfriend to the pedophile who molested dozens of young children. Each type of offender presents a different level of risk for committing new offenses. For example, the teenager described

above is less likely to commit a new sex offense than the child molester.

Research local laws and ordinances regarding sex offenders. Some cities bar them from living within a certain number of feet of churches, playgrounds and other places where children gather. Others prohibit sex offenders from being anywhere children congregate.

In addition, it's a good idea to consult with legal counsel before beginning to work with sex offenders. Your attorney can help you review your policies and ensure they provide adequate protection for your church.

Develop Procedures

If you decide to allow sex offenders to attend your church, it's important to develop a set of procedures that offer accountability for them and protection for all members, especially children and people with disabilities.

These procedures will restrict sex offenders' participation in church life, but those who are truly repentant and who recognize the effect of their crimes should understand and accept the need for limitations.

To help you develop these policies, churches that decide to minister to sex offenders should consider the following general recommendations:

Develop a covenant with the offender. Before allowing offenders to participate in church services, ask them to commit to a covenant designed to help them avoid situations that provide opportunities for further offense.

The covenant should clearly state the amount of participation your church will permit. Typically, it requires that the offender avoid all contact with children on church property or at church-sponsored activities. If your church has a nursery or an area for children's ministry, the offender should never be allowed there for any reason.

The covenant also should include permission to convey information about the offender's conviction to others in the congregation if you believe it's necessary. It should also include any other stipulations you require, such as ongoing counseling with church leaders or an outside therapist.

The covenant should emphatically state that if the offender violates any of its provisions, he or she will no longer be allowed to attend your church. In addition, the covenant should note that offenders can be denied all access to church property if they disagree with or fail to comply with the terms of the covenant.

Assign an accountability partner. To shield the offender from temptation and ensure he or she has no chance to commit further crimes while at church, the contract also should appoint an accountability partner. This person is generally a church leader or an individual who has been screened in advance.

The accountability partner and the offender should always stay within sight of each other when at church. To avoid burnout, you might consider asking several people to rotate this responsibility. However, be careful to avoid miscommunication that leaves an offender unsupervised. ("I thought it was Bill's turn this week!")

Consider ongoing counseling. To ensure the sex offender receives appropriate guidance, and to help your church assess potential risks, you might want to establish regular counseling sessions between the offender and the pastor or other church leaders. The covenant also could specify meetings with an outside counselor, with regular progress reports submitted in writing to an appointed church leader or pastor.

Communicate with church members. As early as possible, you'll need to decide who in your church needs to know that a particular person has a history of sex offenses, from a handful of people to the entire congregation. Church leaders — including the pastor,

elders and children or youth ministers — should be told that such a person is participating in church activities. They also should know that the offender has agreed to a covenant with the church that sets limitations on participation, establishes accountability partner oversight, and precludes any contact with children, young people or people with disabilities.

As you discuss the presence of sex offenders with others, you should limit any communication to factual statements. They should be considerate and circumspect, not slandering or defaming offenders. Also take care to avoid speculation about what might have happened in the past or could happen in the future. Be aware that church members who weren't originally informed of this decision might eventually learn of it. Know in advance what you're going to say to them.

However you communicate with anyone in your ministry, you should do so in consultation with appropriate legal counsel. Victims, especially, have a right to privacy that you're 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 already have a policy in place that requires a criminal background screen for all persons working with children and youth ministries. The policy should make clear that any person with a history of sex offenses isn't allowed to work with teens or children in the congregation or socialize with them at any time.

Don't do it alone. It's usually beyond the scope and experience of any church to single-handedly assess the risk that a sex offender will re-offend. You'll gain experienced resources by collaborating with the various community agencies and staff involved with helping offenders re-enter the community. These might be probation officers, social workers, psychologists, counselors and police officers.

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.

Further, meeting with other support people, with the permission of the sex offender, can provide a strong demonstration of your church's desire to support offenders, yet hold them accountable.

Assess each situation individually. Everyone's situation will be different. Some offenders are truly repentant, and the church can play an important role in encouraging their faith commitment as they work to conquer old behaviors and urges. Other offenders, unfortunately, might still be seeking opportunities to approach children or other potentially vulnerable people.

Whatever guidelines you establish, make sure you can customize your approach to address individual situations. As your pastor and church leaders meet with individual sex offenders and work with their probation officers, social workers and local police, they'll get a better sense of whether or not they should allow the offender to participate, and to what extent.

Churches can play a substantial role in helping sex offenders return to society and rebuild their lives. As offenders try to rebuild their lives, restore their relationships and overcome old behaviors, they can receive much-needed support and deepen their faith commitment by participating in faith communities.

Laura J. Brown is a writer and communications specialist with Brotherhood Mutual Insurance Co., one of the nation's leading insurers of churches and related ministries. The company custom designs property and liability insurance to help ministries run safely and effectively. To discover free resources that can help protect your ministry, visit www.brotherhoodmutual.com.



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