

Modern-Day Lepers

BY SYLVIA PETERSON

What happens when sex offenders want to join your congregation?

When Jason was released from prison he had three goals: find a place to live, find a job and find a church. He expected to have difficulty identifying someone who would rent to him. He also expected that he'd have a hard time finding a job. He never considered that finding a church would be the hardest of the three. Jason is a sex offender.

Jason followed the advice of his Christian mentors and the prison chaplain. He identified churches consistent with his beliefs and made appointments to meet with the pastors. He was honest and transparent, sharing his personal history with candor and humility. But he heard variations of the same response over and over: "You'd probably be happier at the church down the street." Of course, the church down the street said the same thing.

"I tell releasing sex offenders that they need to do three things to continue growing spiritually," says Greg Duncan, Jason's prison chaplain at the time of his release. "First, they need to go to church. Second, finding a church will be difficult. And third, they need to be open and honest with the pastors. No pastor wants to find out after the fact that they have a sex offender worshipping with them every Sunday."

Unfortunately, Jason's experience is the norm, not the exception.

Compassion vs. Safety

By biblical mandate, the church is called to minister to sinners. But does this or should this include sex offenders? The issues are emotionally complex.

Today's media consistently captures the impassioned speeches of citizens begging to keep sex offenders out of their neighborhoods. Their fear is very real. The crimes of these notorious sinners are horrible. There are long-reaching emotional, psychological and physical injuries associated with sexual offenses. Most people understand that someone could be angry enough to murder or desperate enough to steal. But how could someone morally deteriorate to the point of molesting a child or raping a woman? Murderers and thieves are seen as having committed horrible crimes. Sex offenders are seen as being horrible people.

Generally, the public believes that all released sex offenders are just waiting for an opportunity to repeat their incomprehensible crimes. Children and vulnerable adults must be protected. The scars of victims and survivors of sexual abuse cannot be ignored. The church, being made up of these frightened citizens, must be sensitive to their beliefs and fears.

This brings many churches to a critical point of conflict. How can they protect parishioners and at the same time obey the mandate of the gospel? The contemporary church is called to minister to the lost and oppressed. Often the very doctrine on which a church's denomination was founded addresses conversion, forgiveness, regeneration and healing. However, when it comes to sexual crimes, the issues are infused with such raw emotion that they appear less clear.

Can God change sinners? How can we be assured that someone has truly repented and changed? Is God's forgiveness big enough for sex offenders who sincerely repent? And even if God can forgive, can we forgive them? These questions strike at the core of Christian faith.

"Unfortunately, it's pretty easy for pastors to justify turning sex offenders away. They are protecting their congregations," Duncan says. "But our guys aren't really the ones they need to fear. Once an offender has been arrested, convicted, incarcerated and released, he or she is monitored for the

rest of their lives. The sex offenders who are the biggest threats are the ones who sit in church every Sunday and haven't been identified yet."

Common Misconceptions

Duncan, who began working with sex offenders with Washington state's Special Commitment Center in 1998, says there's a lot of misinformation on how people are labeled as a sex offenders and on the likelihood that they will repeat their actions.

"In Washington state, if an 18-1/2-year-old boy is sexually intimate with a 16-year-old girl, even if they are boyfriend and girlfriend and she is fully consenting, it is considered statutory rape and he can be convicted and labeled as a sex offender for the rest of his life," he explains.

Many states utilize a "level system" that assesses offenders and labels them based on a psychological profile that determines their recidivism, or the likelihood of them reoffending. Most offenders leave prison at the highest level—not because what they did is exceptionally horrendous, but because they either refused or didn't have an opportunity to complete a state-approved, secular treatment program while they were in prison.

In Jason's case, he refused treatment and waited until he was released from prison so he could be treated by a Christian therapist, which he paid for out of his own pocket. To avoid possible litigation for underinforming communities, the Department of Corrections released him at the highest level available, level three.

Statistics regarding sex offender recidivism don't necessarily warrant the degree of fear often found in local communities. Citizens are usually surprised to hear that the rearrest rates for nonviolent drug and property crimes are twice those for sexual crimes.

But why the misconception?

"For one thing, sex offenders are monitored much closer than most other released inmates," Duncan says. "They have gone through a humiliating legal process and experienced severe judgments by other inmates and correctional staff. If they have any conscience at all, they will do anything to avoid repeating the experience. And finally, let's face it: A fair number of them were just dumb kids who made a mistake with

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huge consequences.”

However, all the comforting statistics in the world won't change the expression on a pastor's face when a sex offender walks into the office and begins to tell his story. Forgiveness and regeneration aside, there are children and vulnerable adults who have the right to expect their church to be a safe place to worship and grow spiritually. There are logistical issues and church liability issues to consider.

Who would need to be notified? What would the parents of young children say if they knew? Would there be a mass migration out of the congregation? Might it even cost a pastor his job? In almost every scenario, the quickest and easiest thing to say is, “Thank you for coming by, but I think you'd be happier at the church on the other end of town.”

But when church leaders pick and choose which sinners are welcome and which aren't, they may be unknowingly making statements about their beliefs and their communities. “God can forgive my sin, but not yours.”

The Process of Reintegration

Compelled to reject the quick and easy response, there are many churches today that are successfully welcoming sex offenders into their congregations. Greg Chantler, the senior pastor at Praise Covenant Church in Tacoma, Wash., has successfully integrated a

The Church/Offender

If you are considering letting a sex offender attend your church, it's important to have the offender sign a contract to set up guidelines for the safety of everyone involved. Here is a list of possible requirements to include in a church/offender contract:

1 I will fully disclose the exact nature of my past offense to the senior pastor or his/her designee and submit to a criminal background check. This information will be held as confidential and shared only at the discretion of church leadership and on an “as needed” basis.

2 I will have no intentional contact with minors under the age of 18, vulnerable adults and any other individuals representative of my past convictions or crimes and will not be alone with them.

3 If asked to supervise or watch a child or vulnerable adult for any reason, I will decline.

4 I will not sit next to a child/vulnerable adult at any time I am on church property. If such persons sit next to me I will move to a different seat. Whenever possible I will attempt to sit on the aisle seat with my guardian.

5 I will not be in areas of the church where children/vulnerable adults are being taught.

6 I will not take a child/vulnerable adult home with me, provide transportation for them or attempt to see them outside of church.

7 I will not kiss or hug children/vulnerable adults. If such people attempt this contact with me, I will remove myself from the situation.

8 I will not allow a child to sit on my lap, even with my guardian present.

9 I will not go to a church member's home if they have children/vulnerable adults present.

number of them into his congregations over the last 20 years in ministry.

“I believe that God is a God of second chances,” Chantler says. “With that said, we do have a responsibility to everyone who worships here. We don't want to be naive.”

Successful integration into Praise Covenant's fellowship is often determined by the initial approach of the offender. Chantler says the key is that they are honest with him so that the church knows exactly what needs to be done for safety.

er Contract

10 I will not place myself in a position of authority that the church leadership has not approved for me, especially involving children and/or vulnerable adults.

11 I will not make any inappropriate sexual remarks, sexual gestures or sexual humor to anyone at church.

12 Parish staff, ushers, childcare providers and others on a need-to-know basis will be made aware of this contract so that they can also provide accountability and oversight. This is for my own protection as well as that of others who participate in this church.

13 An approved adult guardian who knows about my offense will supervise/accompany me at all times while I am on church property. (This includes restrooms and parking.) The guardian will hold me accountable for my behavior and will meet the following conditions: Agree to submit a criminal background check. Sign a document agreeing to the supervisory guidelines. Be of the same gender as the offender.

14 If asked to meet with a representative of this church's leadership, I will comply. This includes pastoral counseling and discipleship.

15 If I have sexual thoughts or fantasies regarding a minor, vulnerable adult or church member representative of my past offense, I will notify my guardian and treatment provider/therapist.

16 I will sign a release of information for a leadership representative of this church to permit communication with my Community Corrections Officer and treatment provider/therapist.

Source: Agape Resource Ministry. For more information, visit agaperesourceministry.org.

Knowingly having a sex offender in the body of Christ does have a potential impact on the church. It demands responsible leadership and tenacious compassion. Once the need has been identified, safeguards must be put into place.

"This is a ministry opportunity," Chaplain Duncan often tells local churches. "But we need to go about it smart, with our eyes wide open."

A number of organizations and denominations have implemented

policies and procedures that permit sex offenders to join the church with dignity and safety addressed up front. The Methodist Church of England, the Catholic Church and Prisoner's for Christ have all developed useful materials. Central to their success is a "church/offender contract," which formalizes expectations, restrictions and accountability. The contract protects children and vulnerable adults, but also protects the sex offender, who has much to lose if accused of an action perceived as predatory or morally questionable.

A standard contract usually includes such requirements as: "I will accept an approved adult escort to be with me whenever I am on church property." "I will never be alone with a child/vulnerable adult." "I accept that certain people will be told of my circumstance because they are responsible for the safety of children/vulnerable adults." "I will decline personal invitations to the homes of parishioners with children/vulnerable adults."

Once the contract is signed, the senior leadership is responsible for deciding who truly needs to know. A balance must be struck between the offender's need for a degree of privacy and the support, safeguarding and acceptance of the congregation.

Church leadership and personal

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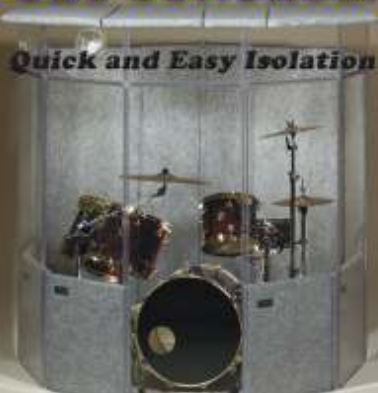
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escorts assigned to the offender are nearly always notified. They don't need all the details, just enough information so they can assure safety.

"I don't notify the congregation any more than I would make a public announcement of any member's sin," Chantler says. "And in this case, there is no reason to freak people out. I want this to be a church that accepts all people."

Not all sex offenders reoffend, and those who are the least likely to do so are those who have experienced the accountability, love and support of a Christian community. Although integrating them into the church can feel initially risky, there may be greater risks in turning them away. The gospel is clear in its mandate.

At no time does Jesus ever suggest that any are beyond His Father's love, grace and redemptive powers. Throughout the New Testament, even notorious sinners are given the opportunity to walk the holy path of regeneration and healing.

In spite of several discouraging interviews with local pastors, Jason didn't give up. He had been saved and baptized in prison. He knew who he had been prior to incarceration. But Jason also knew who he was the day he was released. Even more importantly, he knew whose he was.

Eventually he sat down with a pastor who not only listened to him, but also took the time to begin a deep and meaningful dialogue. When asked why he wanted to attend church, Jason's voice didn't waiver. "I received the gift of salvation in prison," he said. "Now I want to grow in my relationship with Jesus, and I want a church where I can worship."

The pastor looked Jason directly in the eye. "You say you are saved ... then we won't have a problem, will we."

It could have been a question, but it wasn't. It was a statement and an agreement between two men who both knew they were sinners, equally saved by grace. ■

Sylvia Peterson has been a volunteer in prison ministry for 27 years and is co-pastor of Bald Hill Community Church in Yelm, Wash.