

Part IV

Biblical solutions for managing hidden and known offenders who attend church

We have found that the senior church leadership of many churches have decided to delegate to youth ministers and children's ministry directors the entire burden of keeping children safe from sexual abuse. We urge you to recognize the weighty responsibility of protecting the children, the most vulnerable among us: "the least of these". We want to impress upon you the importance of the overall church environment in promoting or preventing child sexual abuse. This environment is created and supported by the leadership.

What kind of church environments reduce the risk for offending?

A church where the leadership leads as servants. Some church atmospheres promote blind obedience to the leadership, and silence about any problems. This is the darkness that sexual offending needs in order to thrive. A servant leadership promotes honesty, openness and growth. Read Acts 17:11

A church where God's plan for healthy sexuality is proclaimed in appropriate ways for different age groups, and parents are helped and supported in providing healthy information at home. Children with a healthy understanding of themselves, and God's plan for them and for their sexuality are less likely to be targeted for victimization, and less likely to submit to an offender.

A church where the leadership is aware of suspicious behaviors, and models for the rest of the church how to address suspicious behaviors in a Christ-like manner. Learning to recognize suspicious behaviors is an important task. There is a growing set of resources from government, and from private foundations to learn of these behaviors. Learning to address these behaviors in a Christ-like manner has few resources, and depends heavily on the personal leadership and example in the individual church.

A church with an atmosphere of mutual accountability. Churches where autonomy and independence are so ingrained that no one is welcome to enter another's personal life, set up a friendly environment for sexual abuse. No one is willing to address suspicious behaviors, or even obvious abusive situations for fear of offending or interfering. A church where mutual accountability is expected makes it easier for people to address suspicious situations, which scares away the unrepentant offender looking for victims, and convicts the hidden offender struggling with his sin, and helps move him toward repentance and confession.

Summary

1. Clear and "do-able" policy is essential to child safety.
2. Senior church leadership need to know, understand, and support the church's policy for working with children and youth.
3. Church leadership set the tone for keeping abuse in the dark or bringing people out into the light and to healing.

Managing hidden sex offenders who attend church.

There are two major areas to pay attention to. The first is **policy** for working with children and youth. Clear and “do-able” policy is essential to prevent abuse and to prevent misunderstandings and false accusations. This policy should address the typical behaviors offenders use to select and prepare victims: seeking time alone, increasing physical touch, sexual comments, gifts, breaking rules, and public embarrassment. It should also include a background check, even though most offenders have a clean background check. The small percentage that can be deterred or excluded by this procedure is still a significant safety factor. There are actually registered offenders who have been identified by church background checks. If some registered offenders submit to background checks, imagine how many seek a church that does not require them.

Because the background check will only identify a small percentage, the policy should also include a “safety letter” (sample included in the resource packet). This letter is included in the application for working with children or youth. It is received by everyone who applies, but it speaks to the heart of the hidden offender, urging them to back out of this ministry at the least, but ultimately to confess and change. We have been surprised at the number of people who have responded actively or passively to this letter. Many have passively responded by stopping their pursuit of working with children. Many others have confessed and sought out help for inappropriate sexual thoughts or behavior which could lead to offending. There are accounts of people who have committed crimes against children who, without having been caught or accused, convicted by the Spirit, have confessed their sin and crime, and sought forgiveness and help, even though it meant exposing themselves to legal consequences. Regardless of the part the senior leadership played in creating policy, they need to be aware of and support the policy if it is to be respected and followed. Leaders must also be prepared to deal with those who seek help because of the process.

The second area follows the pattern of the “safety letter”, but is addressed to the congregation as a whole. A church that pretends to be full of flawless and perfect people makes it that much more difficult for people with behavior that is illegal, or leading toward abuse, to confess. Confession is an important part of stopping behavior that has been abusive or is leading toward abuse. A church where the leadership acknowledges that it is possible that members are engaged in sexual sin that is abusive or leading to abuse, paves the way for the hidden sinner to repent and confess and seek help. One of the Accountability Standards of Keeping Kids Safe Ministries is for the church leadership to at least once a year present a sermon on repentance, incorporating a message from Keeping Kids Safe Ministries (DVD or teleconference) for offenders to repent and confess.

Summary

1. In order to speak to hidden offenders you must address everyone.
2. Background checks and a specific appeal to hidden offenders applying to work with children have both been effective in removing some people from risk.
3. “We do not receive because we do not ask.” Communicate to the hidden offender in your church by public acknowledgement that it is possible, and that God can forgive and redeem.

Managing registered sex offenders who attend church to worship.

Should we allow registered sex offenders in our church?

Jesus died for all sinners including sex offenders.

But, how do we deal with part of the congregation accepting the grace and forgiveness of all sinners while others fear for their children's safety? How do we avoid a church split?

How do we meet the spiritual needs of repentant sex offenders and keep our kids safe?

(note: The majority of registered offenders are men, so this lesson's language reflects that circumstance. If you are dealing with a female registered offender, most of these recommendations apply in the same way, but it is even more important to seek ongoing professional guidance since the profession of sex offender management is continuing to grow in our understanding of female sex offenders.)

We receive more crisis calls from churches dealing with repentant sex offenders who attend church than any other issue. Church leaders do not have the training in managing registered sex offenders in churches. It is imperative for church leaders to utilize professionals with experience in managing registered or repentant sex offenders.

Registered sex offenders are increasing in church attendance for several reasons. It is difficult to live in a community as a registered sex offender. They are rejected by the community. It is difficult to find a job, and hard to keep relationships once others find out about their history. A friendly and welcoming church is attractive to anyone who feels left out, and this applies to registered offenders. Congregations welcome sinners, fellowship opportunities meet emotional and relationship needs, and Jesus died for all sinners including sex offenders.

Our goal is to keep kids safe and help church leaders deal with registered offenders who attend church. This is not possible unless a church places some expectations on offenders who attend their church. Offenders who attend church must always demonstrate they are seeking God and not seeking kids.

How do offenders demonstrate they are growing in Christ and being accountable? Our ministry provides three tools:

Verification: This helps church leaders verify with probation and treatment providers that the registered offenders are meeting all probation and treatment expectations.

Covenant and Commitments: This is a list of expectations for registered offenders to follow and expectations for church leaders to provide support and guidance. We can help your church adapt this document to the specific circumstances of your church and the particular repentant offender.

Spiritual Growth and Accountability: This is a spiritual accountability program that the offender completes with his assigned covenant partners.

Most church related sexual abuse cases involve church members or leaders without a previous sexual offense conviction. This is more common than the registered offender offending again in a church setting. So there is greater danger from the hidden offender who is likely in your church than from a registered offender submitting to a set of specific commitments.

An important note about victims of sexual abuse:

We must not forget all the people who have been affected by sexual abuse. For most who have been a victim in the past, it will be a real stretch of faith to have a registered offender in the church. The issue of survivors of abuse and their families cannot be tossed aside. Some are looking to the church as a safe place for healing of old wounds of the past. What would Jesus do for the hurting person who has a deep wound caused by an offender? Jesus provides healing for both the victim and the offender. There are no simple answers, but know that you cannot ignore the fact that there are almost certainly victims of past childhood sexual abuse in any church. Any church with a registered offender must be conscious of ministering to both.

Preparation to deal biblically with registered offenders involves working through all sorts of issues that relate to keeping kids safe, healing for the wounded, including those with old wounds being laid open anew, and changing lives. To avoid a registered offender being a stumbling block to other church members, the offender may be asked to limit some church participation. Alternative church participation could be men's ministry or adult small groups without children. Many churches report successful church attendance by registered offenders once a church has prepared the church into a safe environment. Limiting church attendance for registered offenders is sometimes a temporary solution until a safe environment can be established. If a registered offender is limited in church attendance, it is recommended that the church's men's ministry take on the added support for the registered offender to help him grow spiritually.

Are there some sex offenders that should be excluded?

Absolutely! If a registered offender is violating church rules and expectations, church leaders need to take action. High risk offenders may need to be excluded even if they are willing to comply with boundary rules. Good communication with third parties who know the offender's history well is vital in making this determination. Our ministry staff will guide church leaders on how to deal with high risk offenders. A church can minister to the high risk offender at his home or other places. The great commission is to make disciples of all people of the world. The great commission extends to high risk offenders.

Summary

4. Jesus died for all sinners including sex offenders.
5. Churches can keep kids safe, meet the spiritual needs of repentant offenders with accountability, and support survivors of sexual abuse.
6. Different churches will arrive at different solutions for different repentant offenders.