



Protection and Inclusion: Guide for Churches on Safely Including Persons Who Have Committed Sexual Offenses

Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God (Romans 15:7).

You must be as cautious as snakes and as gentle as doves (Matthew 10:16 GNT).

Purpose

Churches that seek to minister in the name of Christ are called to include those who may be stigmatized or rejected by society *while* providing for the protection of children and other vulnerable groups and caring for those who may be survivors of abuse, crimes, or traumatic experiences.

This document offers guidance for churches seeking to incorporate persons who have committed sexual offenses, while maintaining the congregation as a safe and healing community. Elements of it may also be useful for congregations ministering to persons who have committed other crimes, have exhibited questionable behaviors and poor boundaries, or present other special needs.

General Background

Open Communities

Let anyone who is thirsty come to me (John 7:37).

Jesus boldly invited all to come to him. The mission-minded church will faithfully echo that invitation (Revelation 22:17) through a commitment to establish and maintain inviting communities.

These congregations will, necessarily, encounter individuals with deep needs and special challenges, including individuals who have committed sexual offenses. Although unsettling, these situations invite us to remember how Christ responded when the outcasts of his day came to him:

Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners (Matthew 9:12–13).

A church trying to follow this call will resist any impulse to close itself to people with special needs and will maintain the sort of open communities that Christ modeled.

Protective Communities

They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain (Isaiah 11:9).

God's will is that no child or vulnerable person be harmed. The church, especially, should be a safe community in which all are protected.

Congregations that are committed to safety and protection must work intentionally toward realizing those goals. Although it may be uncomfortable to do so, becoming informed about persons who commit

sexual offenses and how children can be protected is essential for a congregation that seeks to practice love and heal brokenness.

So the missional church must not ignore, overlook, or underestimate the harmful potential of sexual abuse or neglect and must implement safeguards necessary to form the sort of safe communities that God desires.

Open and Protective Communities

Many congregations are inclined to be hospitable and inviting to everyone in their community. If, however, they give inadequate attention to concerns of safety and protection, they will miss the goal imagined by the prophet Isaiah:

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them (Isaiah 11:6).

Society sees openness and protection as competing values. As followers of Jesus Christ, churches are called to hold openness and protection in dynamic and creative tension that may lead us to more fully embody Christ's grace, joy, and peace.

Develop a Protective Environment

Churches will find it easier to deal with challenges in a practical and upfront way if they educate themselves in advance and develop plans for safety and protection before a specific situation arises.

Dove's Nest recommends that each congregation take the following steps prior to including an individual who has committed a sexual offense:

1. Learn about child abuse and neglect in general, and sexual abuse in particular. *Let the Children Come: Preparing Faith Communities to End Child Abuse and Neglect* by Dr. Jeanette Harder (Herald Press) is an excellent book that will be helpful for congregations, Sunday school classes, small groups, leadership teams, and individuals. It is also important to learn about sex offenders beforehand as well.
2. Develop a comprehensive child and youth protection policy and assign specific people to be responsible for its implementation and maintenance. Dove's Nest (www.DovesNest.net) offers resources and model and example policies.
3. Use a Christian safe environment curriculum, such as *Circle of Grace*, to educate children and youth about positive relationships with God and others and to help them identify and maintain appropriate boundaries. The *Circle of Grace* curriculum is currently available free to churches and schools affiliated with Mennonite Church USA and at modest cost to others. Visit Dove's Nest website (www.DovesNest.net) for more information.
4. Respond to survivors. Given the prevalence of sexual abuse, congregations should assume there are victims and survivors in their midst and be prepared to hear their concerns and minister appropriately.

Robust protection policies and ongoing education and awareness will be invaluable to a congregation when a person who is known to have committed a sexual offense comes into the congregation. These best practices enable a congregation to maintain boundaries and work, in a positive way, with persons who are known to have committed offenses. They also protect children and vulnerable individuals from those whose offenses have not yet come to light.

Become Aware

Needs of those who have experienced sexual abuse

Most people who have experienced sexual abuse have serious, long-term consequences, including overwhelming feelings of fear, guilt, and anger. Many survivors also experience depression, anxiety, and physical difficulties such as sleeplessness, eating disorders, and fatigue. Some experience post-traumatic stress disorder or recurring memories, such as flashbacks, nightmares, or intrusive thoughts. Many have difficulty developing positive relationships with others, such as friends, spouses, and family members. Some turn to drugs or alcohol to lessen the pain or may show suicidal or self-destructive tendencies.

If the abuse happened in the context of the church, there are also significant spiritual effects. Survivors may find it hard to trust church leaders and may even feel betrayed by God and the church. They may also feel sinful and question God's love for them.

Congregations can express hope and invite healing in many ways.

For example:

1. Reach out to survivors, listen to their stories, and validate their experiences.
2. Make sure [worship services](#) are sensitive to their needs. Do not emphasize suffering or push forgiveness too soon. Instead, highlight God's desire for healing, wholeness, and life. Worship resources are available on Dove's Nest's website: <http://DovesNest.net/resources>.
3. Allow them to grieve what has been taken from them, and help them in seeking repentance and justice from the offender.
4. Provide access to professional resources, as appropriate.
5. Remember that survivors do not all respond the same way and may be at different places on their healing journeys.

Needs of those who have committed sexual offenses

Persons who have been convicted of sexual offenses are often stereotyped, stigmatized, and discriminated against by social and corporate policies. Unfortunately, these practices may actually increase the likelihood of reoffending. Congregations can express hope and invite healing in many ways.

For example:

1. Go beyond the stereotypes. Obtain accurate information. For example:
 - a. Persons who have committed sexual offenses are not all alike. Some have committed heinous crimes, while some young adults are placed on an offender registry for being intimate with a girlfriend or boyfriend who is only a few years younger.
 - b. Although the research is not unequivocal, cognitive behavioral treatment has been found to decrease sex offense recidivism.
2. Learn how your community deals with sexual offenses and the people who commit them. Invite treatment program staff members, parole or probation officers, and others involved with those who have committed sexual offenses to talk about their work and programs. Learn from offenders about the impact of sexual offenses on their lives and relationships. If possible and appropriate, arrange a visit with one or more individuals who have committed sexual offenses and are seeking to avoid reoffending.

3. Learn about [Circles of Support and Accountability](#) (COSA), a restorative-justice based program that assists people to reenter society after a period of incarceration for a sexual offense. The program was originally established by Mennonites in Canada and is now being used in many countries. Its two-fold motto is “No more victims. No one is disposable.” Consider volunteering as a member of a COSA circle or donating for the support of the program.
4. Some offenders may be better served through adult-only programming like coffee meetings, Bible studies, or Sunday school classes. Church members can demonstrate God’s love to the individuals in these activities—in place of or beyond Sunday morning worship services.

In Specific Situations: Working with an Individual Who Has Committed a Sexual Offense

Open and Protective Relationships

Congregations that seek to be inviting and open while protecting children and vulnerable people may become aware of people who have committed sexual offenses (or whose behavior raises concerns) in several ways:

1. A person who is known to have committed a sexual offense inquires about participation in the congregation.
2. A past sexual offense of a person in the congregation is disclosed or comes to light.
3. A person who is already active in the congregation commits an offense. (Note that such offenses or suspected offenses must be immediately reported to the police or child protective services.)
4. A person in the congregation behaves in ways that raise concern.

Regardless of how the congregation encounters such a person, it must carefully consider how it can minister to the individual while protecting children and vulnerable individuals.

Get Information

Direct and open communication with the individual who has committed an offense or whose behavior raises concerns (and with his or her parents, in the case of a minor) is the best first step.

Each situation is different, but here are some basic things to discuss:

1. Nature and details of offense(s)
2. Behaviors that raise concerns
3. Court or other orders pertaining to contacts
4. Treatment history
5. How the offense is regarded by the individual
6. Steps being taken to avoid reoffending
7. Ways the congregation can be supportive
8. Ways the congregation may help the individual avoid offending

With the individual’s cooperation and consent, similar information and recommendations should be sought from probation, parole, mental health, or other involved professionals and authorities.

Congregational leaders will also want to assess the individual’s:

1. level of honesty in reporting offenses—what the individual shares, omits, or minimizes;
2. motivation for being part of the congregation—why involvement is desired, what level of involvement is desired;

3. willingness to recognize the needs of sexual abuse survivors and to respect and accept their needs for safety and healing;
4. willingness to comply with guidelines as a sign of his/her level of healing and willingness to take responsibility for his/her actions;
5. participation in professional counseling, therapy, and outside resources, if appropriate.

Safety measures should be put in place so the congregation is not relying solely on the offender's word. If the individual is not open to communication, congregational leaders will need to proceed with the information that is available to them. However, a written safety plan is successful only if the offender takes full responsibility and is open to being held accountable (Oudshoorn, 2015).

Care for Survivors

If survivors of offenses committed by the individual (or their close family members) are present within the congregation, special care must be taken to assess the impact of the presence of the person who committed the offense in the congregation and to avoid additional traumatic impact upon the victims. In such cases, it may be necessary to exclude the offending individual from the congregation to allow the survivor and his or her family to recover. The advice of survivor's advocates and other professionals experienced in working with survivors of sexual abuse should be sought when dealing with such situations.

Given the prevalence of sexual abuse (at least one in four women have experience sexual abuse and at least one in six men), congregations should assume that there are additional survivors present—beyond the victims of a primary offender.

1. The congregation should be ready to care for them, listen to their concerns, and tend to their needs.
2. The congregation needs to sensitively and confidentially allow voices of survivors to be heard.
3. Services of professional counselors and facilitators should be engaged, as needed.

Develop a Written Plan

The person who has committed a sexual offense may be motivated to avoid reoffending. He or she may welcome compassionate help and accountability. In such cases, the individual (and his or her parents, if a minor) may be involved in developing a positive written plan to guide involvement in the congregation.

In cases in which an individual is uncooperative, defensive, or hostile, a plan will need to be developed unilaterally, using the best information and advice available. However, if the written plan is not signed or is not followed by the individual, exclusion from church, or certain church activities, may be necessary.

Regardless of whether the plan is developed with the individual's participation or independently by the leaders of the congregation, the following topics should be considered for inclusion:

1. Supervision – Should the individual be required to be accompanied by designated persons while in church facilities or attending church activities?
2. Limitations – Will the individual be excluded from specific responsibilities, activities, or areas of the church building?
3. Notification – Will notification of the individual's participation be made? If so, to whom (e.g., parents, teachers, youth sponsors, new participants, survivors) and how? Some experts recommend that disclosure be provided to all members of the church. (See [Church Law and](#)

- [Tax resources](#) below.) Others suggest notifying only parents of minors. In general, open communication allows members to ask questions and helps everyone feel more comfortable.
4. Support – How will the congregation be supportive of the individual as he or she seeks to be restored to the community and participate in the congregation in a positive way? (See [COSA resource](#) below.)
 5. Noncompliance – How will the congregation respond if the individual violates the terms of the agreement? What changes might be imposed (warnings, additional restrictions, exclusion from the congregation, etc.)?
 6. Implementation – Who will monitor adherence to the plan? How will they relate to the individual? How often will reviews be conducted? How will changes be made, if they are required?
 7. Acceptance – The plan should be signed by the individual (and parents, if a minor) and congregational leaders. Any involved supervising or treatment professionals (probation, parole, mental health, treatment staff, etc.) should also receive copies of the plan.
 8. Volunteer Roles – A person with a history of sex offense against children should never be allowed to be with children alone, serve as a teacher or caregiver, or socialize with children at the church. Instead they should be welcomed to participate in worship and all adult activities.

For sample limited access agreements and checklists, see pages 30–35 of *Balancing Act* by Debra Haffner.

Final Cautions

Protection is the first priority. Keeping children and other vulnerable people from harm is essential. If guidelines are violated or policies are ignored by the individual with an offending history, measures must be taken to ensure safety. In such cases, it may be necessary to exclude the individual from participation.

Reporting child abuse is required. Regardless of congregational process or policy, any suspected child abuse—including sexual abuse, emotional abuse, neglect, or physical abuse—*must* be reported to the police or child protective services at once. This is the law, and it is the best way to protect children in our congregations and communities.

Practice child protection. Guidelines for those who are known to have committed sexual offenses should never take the place of robust child protection policies and ongoing education and awareness. These measures maintain positive protective boundaries for all. Remember that less than 10 percent of all sex crimes result in a criminal conviction, so many sex offenders in our communities have not been identified (<http://www.atsa.com/>).

Know your limitations. The congregation may be a supportive and caring community, but it is not able to replace professional counseling or treatment. Each congregation differs in their ability to include individuals who have committed sexual offenses. Not every congregation will be able to include every individual. Congregations who accept offenders with a written plan should regularly check in with an outside individual or group for consultation. This could be Dove’s Nest, area conference or denominational leadership, or another appropriate organization.

Resources

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*Faith Communities Keeping
Children & Youth Safe*

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