

Sex Offenders in the Church

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(An excerpt from *Without Precedent*; a book soon to be published by Reclamation Ministry to assist individuals required to register and their families.)

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*Liability issues have forced some churches to take extraordinary measures to deal with those who must register. But why should one group of sinners be singled out from all the rest? We all fall short in the eyes of God but the good news is; **no sin is beyond His ability to forgive!***



No one in their right mind wants to see any more children harmed and it is certainly not my intention to minimize the pain victims have already suffered through sexual abuse. A lot of suffering occurs because of it – not just by the victims but families, and communities, and nations suffer, too! I had high hopes that the church would step up and really do something

about it by bringing the truth to light. There is so much misinformation surrounding this problem and misdirection in the laws that assume all sex offenders are equally dangerous. I had hoped the church would put an end to all the sex offender hysteria, fear and anger like Jesus did with the adulteress in the book of John. The news media and lawmakers certainly haven't done anything but fan the flames – and in many cases even started the fires. Looking at the battered Catholic Church (and they aren't the only guilty ones), other churches are sticking their "tails between their legs" and running in the opposite direction. Some churches are just looking the other way with a kind of "don't ask, don't tell" policy. A few are taking the "hard-nosed" approach, banning sex offenders all together. Satan (the greatest liar of all) is having a field day with all the confusion, lies and hypocrisy!

There are some denominations and churches I know about that have made an honest attempt at putting sex offender policies in place, but they're missing the boat, too. Certainly, none of the so-called solutions glorify Christ because they all separate one group of sinners from the rest!

Silent Screams

“While concerns are raised over registered offenders, there are people already in the pews who are in secret sexual sin with a teen or child or struggling with a sexual problem.” – ChristianPost.com April 2007

Just like everyone else, churches are focusing on the registered offenders and ignoring the fact that the vast majority (some estimate 85 – 90%) of sex offenders haven't been caught and aren't registered.¹ Without getting help, many of the ones that haven't been caught continue to offend. That means a lot of this stuff is going on and no one is doing anything about it. At least not until the offender turns himself in or is caught. Much of the abuse is occurring within families. So in essence, churches are turning their backs on their own congregation by doing nothing. Families, especially children, are suffering in silence not knowing where to turn for help. Afraid if they do seek help, the family will be broken apart and everything lost! David Peters, author of *A Betrayal of Innocence*, calls their anguish “silent screams”.

If churches would, they could retake a lot of the ground the enemy has stolen. If, as one expert in the field contends, 1 in 20 men will sexually molest a child, then think about how many may already be sitting in the pews. Just do the math – are there fifty men in your church? Two hundred? Five hundred? The same expert says 93% of the offenders attend church on a regular basis.² Based on those numbers, the odds of at least one unrecognized offender sitting in your church is pretty high. But there's probably more than one out there praying for help.

Take the show; *To Catch a Predator*. It was canceled after three seasons on NBC, going down in a ball of flames like it deserved. I despised the show. My wife and I argued over it every time it aired. But there was one good point it made, although not intentionally. A total of two hundred and sixty five men were lured on the false promise of having sex with a minor. Not all of them appeared on the show. But of those, ONLY FOUR were registered sex offenders. I don't know the story on the four that did show up, and I don't want to excuse their actions, but I think one had just been apprehended and hadn't started treatment. Another one may have been intellectually challenged. But just do the math on those numbers! The registered sex offenders that did show up were less than two tenths of a percent of all the guys ready and willing to engage in illegal sex! Technically, all of them were sex offenders not recognized by the system until they made their sinful choices. And this confirms the point

¹ NPR Radio, Talk of the Nation, *The Science of Sex Abuse*, Professor Jennifer Freyd, University of Oregon, 2005

² *The Stop Child Molestation Book* by Gene Abel and Nora Harlow, 2001

made by the Christian Post earlier; it is not the ones who have been caught that everyone needs to worry about. It is the ones who haven't. That's the vast majority of them, still out there causing a lot of misery, not only to others but to themselves! In the meantime, with the laws that have been created, we're arming ourselves for bear when it's the mosquitoes that are eating us alive.

So, praise God if you have a registered sex offender coming to church service. Let me say that again. PRAISE GOD if you have a sex offender come sit in your pews. Maybe your church is doing something right and God has led him there. He has certainly brought him there for a reason. Maybe he is reaching out, tired of being treated like a leper. All offenders, like every other person, need somewhere to turn to feel connected to the community and God. Going to church actually lessens the risk of reoffending. It lowers the already low chance of recidivism. Isn't that what everyone wants? No more offenses! No more victims!

Maybe God brought them to your church because you need them. They have a powerful testimony to share. It might bring healing to others in the congregation or lead someone to get help. More than likely it is a union of mutual benefit; you need each other to grow and mature in the spirit of God.

Why Should One Group of Sinners be Singled Out From the Rest?

Are there some sins that are unforgiveable? Are there any sins beyond God's ability to forgive? I don't think so. Why then should one group of sinners be singled out from the rest? Consider this quote from a major denomination's publication (the emphasis is mine):

*"As dreadful and wretched as it seems, it has become common to hear **horrific** reports of children being harmed and **abused by someone with a prior record of this kind of behavior**. Even more **horrific**, some of these accounts have been connected to churches. The reality is no denomination is exempt from the risk of **predators** seeking to exploit those who are most vulnerable. In fact, some **predators** specifically choose to use the trusted environment of a church community to satisfy their **vile appetites**."*³

Again, No one in their right mind wants to see any child suffer through sexual abuse. All reasonable efforts should be directed towards that end. But somewhere, somehow, we have to get back to reality. The above

³ SBC Life, Prudence, Protection, and Church Policies, Joe Langford, June 2008



statement does nothing but incite fear and anger. Think the words “horrific” and “predator” are used enough? I certainly don’t read a lot of grace or forgiveness into the statement, either. And there is some big time misinformation in the statement. He states, more and more children are being “**harmed**

and abused by someone with a prior record of this kind of behavior.” The fact is studies in several states have determined most offenses are committed by **first time** offenders with no prior record. A study in New York claims the percentage is as high as 95%!⁴ By the way, the person making this statement is the owner and president of a large security firm. Stirring up a little fear is good for business wouldn’t you say? Perhaps there are predators of another sort out there. Short of placing guards at every door to prevent these *vile predators* from appeasing their *lustful appetites*, what kind of sex offender policy should churches have? What happens when it is discovered someone attending services is a sex offender? Do you let him stay? Ask him to leave? Stick your head in the sand and hope nothing happens? The “don’t ask, don’t tell” approach won’t work these days because many parole and probation officers require their clients to disclose to pastors of the church they want to attend. Pastors who do nothing face enormous liabilities if something happens in the church or on church property. It boils down to these issues: protection of the vulnerable, honoring victims, forgiving the offender, and addressing the ever looming, all consuming liability issue.

Liability! What if Jesus had told Matthew, “I’m sorry but you gotta go. You’re too big of a liability. People just don’t like what you’ve done in the past. They don’t trust you! In fact, the Zealot in our camp is ready to slit your throat.” As many know, Matthew was a tax collector before he met Jesus. Tax collectors were considered pariahs – enemies of the state, rankest of the rank, and hated by the people, especially the Zealots. (Sound familiar?) Of course, Jesus didn’t say such a thing, and thank goodness He didn’t. We’d have missed out on one of the great books of the New Testament. The fact that Jesus brought together two such dynamically opposed individuals as



⁴ American Psychological Association, *Does a watched pot boil? A time-series analysis of New York State's sex offender registration and notification law*, Jeffery Sandler, Naomi Freeman, Kelly Socia, 2008

disciples is a testament to the strength of His love and influence. Simon the Zealot would just as soon have slit the throat of the tax collector but he didn't. I believe this is what a church can do through Christ. It is what a church should do. It can heal and restore what hatred and fear has stolen from us all, both victims and offenders alike.



Some churches are beginning to take a more reasonable approach to this issue. They're calling off the guards at the doors and putting together policies and practices. But there are some who aren't sincere about it at all, those who say with a big cat grin, "SURE! Come on in. Stay and worship," and then hand the offender a contract to sign and a 500 page book with policies and rules he must abide by just to come worship on Sundays. (There's another book if he wants to participate in church activities outside of worship.) Of course, I'm being a little sarcastic but there is some truth to what I say. Even though some churches don't turn anyone away just so they can say; "We accept all who come for worship", they make it nearly impossible for individuals who must register to live by their standards!

As I said earlier, based on my experience even the churches that sincerely want to extend a hand to offenders and their families are missing the mark. Generally speaking, they design a document (a contract between the church and the offender) called a *Limited Access Agreement* or *Covenant of Boundaries* or *Covenant of Grace* that describes where the offender is to enter and exit the church and what areas he may not enter, usually nurseries and other areas designated for children's activities. Other parts of the covenant contain procedures for being escorted on church grounds and during church activities and meeting regularly with an accountability group. Some include provisions allowing church officials' access to an offender's treatment provider and supervising officer. An offender cannot seek any position of authority within the church. Use of the restrooms on church grounds is discouraged except for emergencies and dating or socializing with any church member is forbidden. Some policies even designate where offenders may sit during church services. The offender must sign the covenant before he (and his family if he has one) can come to church on Sunday.

There Are No Sins Beyond God's Ability to Forgive

I guess it is the last part that really gets my goat! Why not have all persons guilty of one sin or another sit in designated areas? – adulterers

here, thieves there. “No. No, you can’t sit here – this section is for murderers.” I mean, ask yourself; what would happen if there was only one designated seating area for sin in a church and it was for people who have lied? I would say anyone sitting outside of that area just created a new one.

I say “hogwash”! There are NO sins beyond God’s ability to forgive. There is NO reason to single out one group of sinners from all the rest! Just like He forgives the father that shouts in anger at his children then asks for forgiveness or the man that repents and lays down the bottle, HE FORGIVES the man repentant of sexual sins!

Why is Church So Important?

Seems like an obvious question and answer. Here’s my spin on it. I went to treatment and I received a lot of “head knowledge” about why I entered into sexual sin and how to control my behavior. But I didn’t want to just control it – I wanted to conquer it! “Sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it.” (Genesis 4:7)

I went to church and I listened when the preacher said; “Christ died for our sins” and I believed it. I believed it applied to everyone but me – my sins were unforgivable. And that was confirmed everywhere in the world – in the news media, by politicians, on talk shows, in treatment – nearly everywhere I turned I was being called a monster and a predator. And even worse, there was no hope for me and those like me. So I carried all this “crap” around inside me. I didn’t know it at the time but carrying around all that stuff actually increased the chances I might reoffend. Praise God I didn’t! And that is why churches are so important. Once I heard a pastor say the words; “There is no sin beyond God’s ability to forgive”, I cried and I couldn’t stop crying. It was like this relief valve opened up inside of me and all this filthy “crap” spewed out! God what a relief – I was so tired of carrying it around! I decided right then and there I was putting Christ squarely in my heart leaving room for nothing else! But, changes in me didn’t occur overnight. I’m still and will always be a work in progress. Sometimes I take two steps forward just to take one step back. But everyday I wake up a little wiser. Everyday I try to live the way I think God wants me to live. Everyday I seek His guidance.

Until I accepted Christ and put Him in control of my life, all I received from years of treatment was a bunch of “head knowledge”. Don’t get me wrong. I believe treatment is important but without having Christ in my life, I would have wandered the planet still struggling to

control my behavior. That is a dismal existence and the sad thing is it doesn't have to be!

What I say shouldn't be misinterpreted. I've seen guys come into group and try to shirk off responsibility for their past behavior by "hiding behind religion". They would say they've accepted Christ and are now a new creature in Him. They didn't need treatment. I was a new child in Christ, too. But God put me in treatment to help me overcome the power and grip of this sin in my life. I think that's true for most of the guys who are hiding behind the religious veil, too. The church can help put Christ in the hearts of many. And once He's there, it's true there is room for little else! I had a pastor tell me once and I believe this with all my heart for Satan holds a tight grip on those struggling with this sin. "You have to have both Christ and treatment in your life – one without the other renders them both ineffective." The guys hiding behind religion say the words but have no conviction and those that have received treatment without accepting Christ as their lord and savior will continue to struggle with the flesh. A counselor once told me, off the record of course, it was her observation that the ones in group who had spiritual beliefs overcame their struggles easier than the others. And after treatment, they remained offense free. That just confirms it for me. There was a time I would tell you that there is no cure for sex offenders. But I was blind. Now if I'm asked that question, I will tell you, you better believe there's a cure. **It's God!**

Here are some real policies that, if put in place, would eliminate the need to single out individuals based on their sin, demonstrate the church is practicing due diligence and create a safer environment for everyone.

Church Policies Need to Protect the Vulnerable, Honor the Victims, and Forgive the Sexual Sinners
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Suggestion #1</u></p> <p>First and foremost, recognize that no sin is beyond God's ability to forgive. Separate the sin from the sinner and remember that whatever church policy is approved will affect not only the offender and victim but also their families and the children within the families.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Suggestion #2</u></p> <p>Recognize that offenders can repent and change. A fact that is validated by the low recidivism rates and study after study.</p>

Suggestion #3

Acknowledge that an offender who has truly repented is responsible enough not to put him self and others in a risky position and will avoid any situation that might give the appearance of being evil. Contracts are not needed to stipulate where an offender may go or not go within the walls of the church. If an offender is still "on paper" there is usually a term that prohibits any contact with children. He doesn't need it stipulated again. If he's off paper and has children, would you ban him from his own children's activities?

An individual assessment will help determine what if any boundaries should be placed around the offender.

Suggestion #4

Develop and inform the congregation of the church's general policy for individuals who must register. It should be no different from any church policy dealing with all other sinners.

Suggestion #5

Provide training sessions on a recurring basis for clergy and staff covering factual and accurate information about victim and offender issues. The training should also cover the different types of offenders and different risks they pose. Clergy and church staff should be familiar with the tell tale signs of an individual who may be engaged in sexual sin with a child or teen. They should be familiar with the signs in children and teens that are the objects of adult sexual sin. If you are a small church, you might consider combining the clergy and staff from other churches for the training sessions.

Suggestion #6

Recognize that there may be members in the congregation who are struggling with sexual sin and don't know where to turn for help. It is estimated that the 716,000 registered sex offenders represent only 10 to 15% of the actual number of offenders in the country. That means there are potentially 7,500,000 offenders in this country. 93% of those offenders attend church on a regular basis. Provide educational sermons for the whole congregation and recommend ways to receive help for those struggling with sexual issues and sin.

Suggestion #7

Have a policy on how to handle people have decided to become members and disclose they must register. Talk with him and his family in private. Recognize all sex offenders are not the same. They are not all equally dangerous. Discuss the safeguards in the church both for his protection and the protection of others in the church.

Suggestion #8

Offer support groups for offenders and offenders' families. Again, they may have nowhere else to turn. Consider a Celebrate Recovery group specifically for those who are struggling with sexual sin.

Suggestion #9

Switch youth supervision responsibilities periodically. Always have more than one adult supervising the same youth activities. Screen volunteers (conduct background checks) working directly with youth. Individuals with past sexual offenses involving minors should not supervise or be involved in any youth activities. This is something that a repentant person would avoid anyway.

Suggestion #10

Assign individuals to monitor the halls during church services and other activities on church property. Hall monitors act as the first alert for any unwanted intruders or suspicious behavior.

Suggestion #11

Offer support groups for victims. Perhaps God will open a door for offenders and victims to meet for some real healing on both sides.

Suggestion #12

Put a system in place that ensures children in a nursery are returned to proper guardians.

Suggestion #13

In the event something does happen, the church must be prepared to address the issue. Be familiar with state laws that address reporting sexual abuse. In general, church clergy and staff should cooperate with the investigation. Policies for supporting families in crisis should be established. These policies should address the family as a whole as well as the victim and the offender.

Suggestion #14

Be sure whatever policies have been developed and documented are being followed.