



Safe as Churches? 8

“Dealing with known offenders”

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The dilemma for churches

- Welcoming, accepting, loving and creating a sense of belonging while at the same time ensuring safety for all. Beliefs about sin, forgiveness, grace and reconciliation may be challenged by vigilantly watching and protecting.

Problems with this topic

- “Offenders”
- “Known”
- “Dealing with”

“Offenders” Not quite correct. This label leads us to define everything about the person as being connected to risk of harming others. For the vast majority of people who have sexually harmed this is not the case. Importantly it should be noted using this as a totalising label can lead to exclusion and elevating risk.

“Known” By whom? What is known? and how is what may be private information managed within a church community?

“Dealing with” Suggests an authoritative management, which again can be counterproductive. Is there much space for compassionate support? or does fear of being “groomed” or manipulated mean keeping an emotional distance?

Some key things about people who have sexually harmed others

- Most have done so within established relationships, many of which are enduring relationships
- A small number of individuals are responsible for a large number of victims
- In the context of institutions vulnerable children and adults are more likely to be targeted
- A large amount of the sexual harm occurs in private places (people's homes) or during extended informal contact, often involving overnight stays

Some general points to begin

- Training about dynamics and effects of sexual abuse should be provided as part of Safe Church strategy.
- Each church leadership body at a local level should have a plan in place for responding and managing when a person is “known”.
- Part of local planning should include where to seek external specialist advice when needed

Maintenance and Support System & Circles of Support

- Both are examples of professional led programs to promote safety of people in the community
- Common to both are key people being prepared to spend time with individuals, sometimes regularly
- The individual is expected to be clear about standards for conduct, acknowledging his behaviour and any areas of risk, and to be accountable to this small group
- Not meeting his standards should be shared with all in this group and response planned

What promotes safety?

- Social inclusion and participation in groups and activities in the community. This includes developing relationships, experiencing interpersonal closeness.
- Exclusion may work if each person representing risk is identified. However is this practical? And is it forever?
- Note for every “known” there are several “unknown”, so safe church strategies should be broadly protective.
- Many believe “known” persons will be unattached and are relatively new to a church. This category of “known” persons does warrant close support and supervision. But are not all of the people to be concerned about

Inclusion

- Not the same for all
- A level of submission to authority and willingness to be accountable
- Those in authority being prepared to respect and accept the person doing so and holding them to defined standards of conduct

Dynamics

People who sexually harm others generally have:

- Used a range of distorted beliefs to justify their behaviour to themselves and others
- Many of these beliefs represent different levels of denial
- A motivation to engage in sexual behaviour with particular individuals or classes of individuals
- A capacity to break rules, sometimes apparently impulsively
- An ability to engage others around their dynamic

Responding, Managing, Caring for

- Depends on which point in personal process of recovery the person is in (or is not perhaps)
- Knowing what the behaviour was, when, with whom, how much and how ... are all optimal
- Are there strengths in the person's life? Family, home, work, interests, friends, other
- Is the person clear about their interest to be part of a church community?

Key issues

- Isolation and negative emotional states are common area of concern
- Return to past dynamics association with engaging harmful behaviour. Headline issues (easiest) include alcohol or drug use, engaging with explicit sexual material, replicating relationship patterns. Less obvious may be attitude or belief shifts, “technical” rule breaking or changing standards without informing those close to him.

Qualities of people responding, supporting, caring for

- Empathic but not vulnerable to invitations to excuse
- Emotionally, psychologically and spiritually stable
- Not in recovery themselves
- Good personal boundaries
- Satisfying and balanced lifestyle with positive relationships
- Cooperative and communicative with others
- Available when needed

Some issues to be clear about

- Demands of expectations the person may have of what others should do or be (for him). Often in church context this is to be forgiven or even an opportunity to forgive.
- Or a request to *“Prove myself, so you can see I can be trusted”*
- Standards should always include not imposing self on others. Expectations such as these are instrumental to other purposes and are generally regarded as related to abuse dynamics.

Conclusion

- “Known” persons can be safely supported, cared for and managed in church communities
- To do so requires training and planning which is not limited to one person – must be shared
- External professional support should be enlisted in cases where there are greater risks
- There should be clarity about the way in which a person may participate and timely response when this is not met
- Diversity of individual situations means plans must be tailored individually
- Common issues include managing denial, entitled behaviour and non-acceptance of requirements of church leaders



Questions and Discussion