

Finding the Balance



Churches & Sex Offenders

Tim Dyer
John Mark Ministries 2010



Crime, punishment and integration.

A 'circles of support and accountability' story.

2

The dilemma for churches

- How do we create and maintain a safe church environment for those vulnerable to exploitation?
- How at the same time do we affirm grace and forgiveness, openness and inclusion to sex offenders genuinely seeking a faith community?

3

The dilemma for churches

- An assumption to accept:
 - The gospel requires both generous grace and diligent justice.
- An assumption to challenge:
 - That the two issues posed are in direct irresolvable tension with each other.

4



Theology in context

- Church communities are a unique social environment
- Sexual offenders are a complex group with potentially high needs
- Our contemporary society has significant dis-ease around issues of sexuality, power and violence

5



Church community is unique

- Local churches generally aspire to be open and inclusive communities
- Healthy churches tend to be multi-generational and are often family oriented
- Churches assume high levels of trust
- Family (>80) and pastoral (>150) size churches typically do not have well developed structures, process and systems around 'safe church practice'.

6



Churches have history

- Sexual abuse does occur in Christian families, in youth groups, in children's programs, in church ministry and leadership settings. It occurs in all denominations and among Christians of all spiritualities.
- Churches have a tragic history of denial and consequently collusion in responding to this issue.
- Since the mid 90's, public attention has prompted significant changes in professional standards for church workers and in responding to abuse.

7



Sex offenders and the church

- Sex offenders are not a homogeneous group.
- It is not uncommon for offenders to have an appropriate attraction to church communities as many have real social and spiritual needs including a genuine desire to seek accepting community and forgiveness
- There is a sub-group of high functioning, intelligent and manipulative predators capable of using persuasive 'personas' (even that of 'repentant believer') to mask their proclivity to re-offend.

8



4 theological constructs

- **Justice Seeking** – there is a responsibility within communities to protect the vulnerable and to uphold processes that make things just and right
- **Grace Giving** – we are called to accept and include all who acknowledge their need of God's mercy and forgiveness, are repentant and willing to grow
- **Truth Telling** – honesty is foundational to personal transformation and communal trust
- **Peace Making** – while Christians have widely differing perspectives and values, we are called to the challenging task of the construction of peaceable communities.

9



Justice Seeking

- The use of authority and power in 'just community' formation
 - Pastoring, teaching, shaping community, sacramental ministry
- Priority is given to protecting the powerless, vulnerable, oppressed and marginalised
 - Children and young people
 - Those who have been victims of abuse
 - This also includes (and in some situations may exclude) offenders

10



Grace Giving

- We are called to extend mercy and compassion to the abused who have come to the church for hope and healing
 - Those abused within the context of Christian communities
 - Those impacted by the abuse of others either victims or perpetrators
- Forgiveness, healing and integration for offenders.

11



Grace to even these

- Recovery for sex offenders is possible and does occur, although churches should not be naïve about the spiritual, psychological and social challenges involved.
- The consequences of past actions will be ongoing and may potentially be lifelong.
- Part of repentance and integration is the acceptance of accountability, responsibility and the restrictions that membership of a multi-generational community may require.
- On hospitality to “monsters”

12



Truth Telling

- Honesty, openness and creating community
The social value of truth-telling
- Teaching truth about justice and grace in our communities
- Speaking truth about the nature of sexual abuse, the many situations of offenders and the diverse dimensions of safety. Creating a culture of awareness
- In relation to the risk posed by specific individuals; there may be a need to balance protection, privacy and appropriate disclosure in congregational life

13



Peace Making

- Leadership at times of anxiety
- Covenant commitments for Christians in times of conflict and anxiety
- Processes and pathways which create trust
- Peace-making is hard work but it is close to the heart of God

14

A Pathway for Integration



15

Circles of Support and Accountability

- Thorough equipping at denominational and local church levels
 - Careful policy and protocols formation
 - Local leadership support
 - Teaching at local church level
- Thorough ongoing risk assessment in each situation
- Facilitated covenants, signed & witnessed
- Equipped, functional and supported CoSA
- Regular external review process

16

When there is connection and cohesion between these elements the space for abuse is significantly reduced

- Clearly articulated Integration Policy
- Training and support for CoSA groups
- Safe Church committee
- Pastoral education and formation
- Issues processes
- Developing congregational awareness and systemic health
- Developing knowledge and experience

Denominational Protocols, Processes and Policies

Personhood of the offender

Systemic health of the Congregation

- Genuine repentance and spiritual formation
- Full co-operation with covenantal restrictions
- Personal support, meaningful connections and activity
- growing insight into personal issues
- Being an aware community
- Equip and supported CoSA team
- Church policy & supportive leadership
- Community and professional networks
- Safe ministry protocols and boundaries

When each individual element is unhealthy or dysfunctional and there is little connection or cohesion between them the potential space for recidivism and further abuse is significantly increased.

Lack of policy and resources. Denomination difficult to contact, little education for congregations, poor support and supervision structures for offenders, collusion and cover up of past problems

Potential for abuse

Unsupported, stressed or manipulative offender who lacks supervision and

Unaware congregation with complacency or conflict issues and little training

Offenders typically go through ups and downs on the Journey toward wholeness - sometimes they are "less" safe than at others.

Assessing risk

- Offender's personal history relevant to risk
 - Nature of the criminal activity
 - Level of response to treatment
 - Personal journey of faith and repentance
 - Willingness to engage a CoSA process
- Specific congregational environment and capacity to manage a CoSA process
- Level of Denominational experience and support
- Level of access to professional advice and support from agencies (Corrections, Police, Welfare etc)

20

Special circumstances

- When the offender was in leadership or a position of trust
- Unrepentant offenders
- Suspected predatorial manipulation
- Young offenders
- Others

21

Resources

- Church of Scotland General Synod 2009
Joint report of the Mission and Discipleship Council and Safeguarding Committee : "For such is the Kingdom of Heaven – Creating a church where all may safely live"
<http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/extranet/xga/downloads/gareports09wgforgive.pdf>
- Correctional Services of Canada
Circles of Support and Accountability Training Manual, Reports
<http://www.csc-scc.gc.ca/text/prgrm/chap/docs-eng.shtml>
- Anglican Diocese of Adelaide
MOU for Integration of Offenders into Parish Worship

22