

# *Help...*

**sexual offenders and  
church attendance**



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The Christian church is unique in that, based on the uncompromising message of the gospel, it opens its doors to all. It has also been known for some time that a significant number of sexual offenders living in the community also attend church. This may come as a surprise to some, a shock to others, and it is likely to stir up all sorts of feelings and strong opinions.

On a personal level if you are told, or you find out, that a sexual offender has joined or plans to join your church, what is your reaction and what should you do to ensure children and vulnerable adults who also attend your church are protected? This booklet attempts to answer some of these dilemmas and includes comments from a pastor and a sexual offender ('D') in this situation.

## How do I feel?

It is perfectly understandable to be fearful, panicky or, at the very least, apprehensive. Perhaps you feel angry at the thought that someone who has abused children or adults should even be allowed back into the community. There are probably others in your church that, if they knew, would feel exactly the same. Whilst it is important to acknowledge your feelings, any information you have concerning an offender should only be shared on a 'need to know' basis with the leadership in the church who are responsible for ensuring that appropriate safeguards are in place.

**Pastor:** 'When 'D' told me his story it was the first time I was aware of someone with his background in the church. I was grateful for his honesty, but when someone said the crime wasn't as bad as he thought it was going to be, I firmly responded that a sexual offence is serious however we try to wrap it up'.

Keeping everything on a need to know basis protects all. Remember much abuse happens within families. If information is released chaotically or indiscriminately it could unwittingly identify the victim(s).

## What do you mean by 'sexual offender'?

A sexual offender is someone who has committed sexual offences against either children or adults. In this booklet we are primarily referring to people who have offended against children or vulnerable adults. Sexual offences include rape, indecent assault and indecent exposure, exposing children to pornography, and encouraging children to perform sexual acts on themselves, other children or the offender. They also include looking at images of children being abused or photographed in provocative poses.

A number of sexual offenders will have downloaded child abuse images. Others will have made these images, or distributed them to others as well as possessing them.

Whilst some offenders will also have gone on to 'hands-on' offending, others may gather large collections of images on their computer. These offences are often described as 'child pornography' but this is inaccurate as every image captures an actual situation where a child has been abused, therefore a more appropriate term is 'child abuse images'.

Some sexual offenders target children at a specific stage of sexual development. Others do not discriminate in this way, and may also target vulnerable adults. Most target children of a particular gender, but some target both.

Most offenders "groom" children by forming a friendship with them, giving gifts, praise etc. so that the child is comfortable in their presence and trusts them. They also groom parents and carers to gain their confidence that it is alright for them to be around their family. This grooming is very subtle and is usually more recognisable by outsiders than by those being groomed. Single parent families, as well as "loner" children who have not received good nurture, are often targeted.

Most people think of a sexual offender as a lone adult male because this is the image frequently portrayed by the media. Such offenders actually represent between a third and a half of the total. A significant number of allegations of sexual crimes are against other children and young people (between a quarter and a third). Allegations against lone women account for up to a quarter and groups of offenders a similar amount also.

It needs to be borne in mind that most offences are not reported. Certainly CCPAS have dealt with serious cases of abuse referred by churches relating to all these different types of offenders.

Whilst most abuse happens in families, it is important to realise that children of any age may be at risk of abuse by an offender who is part of your church. You should not therefore be complacent about the risks to a child whatever their age and never assume that because, as far as you know, the offender abused younger children they would be safe with an older age group. Any safeguards must be applied across the board!

## What are the on-going risks?

Sexual offenders often display addictive or repetitive behaviour towards children. For this reason, however repentant a sexual offender may appear to be, there are no cast-iron guarantees that they will not re-offend. Even if the offender has undergone treatment or received prayer ministry, they should not be assumed to be safe.

For some worshipping communities there is sometimes a denial that sexual offenders from within their own culture would frequent their place of worship. The fact that an individual demonstrates they are “Born Again” or is “Spirit filled “ is often the only requirement to place them within a position of trust within that community. Sexual offenders are present in all cultures, regardless of ethnicity and religious affiliation. Therefore good sense safeguarding policies and procedures should not be disregarded purely because someone has had a spiritual renewal or experience.

True repentance is a change in thinking and behaviour, to “go and sin no more” so, apart from child protection considerations, in support of the repentant offender’s desire not to fall again we should not place them in a position of vulnerability where they could be tempted to re-offend. Sexual offenders need to be regarded in the same way as someone who has an addiction.

Whilst some offenders when arrested feel relief that their offending behaviour has been stopped, many initially refuse to admit that they have committed an offence and may continue to deny their guilt. This denial can be reinforced by family members who cannot accept the facts. (See the CCPAS leaflet “Help.. Someone I care about may be a sex offender”).

Those offenders who represent a risk to children should be monitored closely and strict boundaries placed on their movements and behaviour within the church setting. Where provision cannot be made to monitor the individual at meetings involving children, it may be necessary to ensure that such offenders only attend meetings at which only adults

are present or, say, a “home group” set up specifically with the offender in mind. It would be important that such a group does not include families with children or is held in a house where children reside.



## What can we do?

Having described the worst-case scenario it is possible to help those who accept that what they have done is wrong and want to change. When they leave prison or the criminal court, they may feel:

- worried about how people will react
- frightened in case the temptation to re-offend overcomes them
- guilty and ashamed
- isolated and lonely

**'D':** 'When leaving prison, society doesn't exactly welcome you with open arms. I did have support from friends and family but generally people don't trust ex-offenders. I felt like a second-class citizen'.

Like anyone, an offender wanting to change will need people around them who will love and accept them, offering care and protection with the assurance that God does not reject them. Alongside this, the people supporting the offender will need to:

- challenge risky or wrong thinking and behaviour
- not allow themselves to be manipulated.
- be relied upon to be supportive to help maintain self-control.

We encourage the setting up of Support and Accountability Groups, particularly for high risk offenders, which can provide a group of people not only to share any necessary chaperoning and monitoring of the offender in church, but also provide a context in which they can address and be supported through the issues they face in life. They will be held to account for their thinking and behaviour, develop a range of close relationships with adults and be disciplined, all of which are key to maintaining an offence-free lifestyle and not giving into temptation.

On-going monitoring is essential and it is important that with changes of staff and leadership over time, knowledge of the offender is passed on to new leaders or staff.

In every situation a careful assessment needs to be made as to whether the church can safely

and adequately work with the person. Seek the help of police and probation in carrying out risk assessments which need to consider the details of offending and subsequent behaviour and attitudes. You will also need to take into account your own church circumstances, accepting the fact that some people will be just too risky and may need to be helped to find another fellowship where the risk to children can be more easily managed.

**‘D’:** ‘I know I can phone if I’m in trouble. I know they want to help me. These people give up their free time. It’s about feeling like a person again, not a number’.

## What about boundaries?

Behavioural boundaries need to be put in place. These should help the offender feel secure and less at risk of false accusations. Most importantly, these boundaries will serve to protect children and young people who attend church activities.

- An offender should not be permitted to get close to children (either physically or emotionally)
- He or she should not sit in the vicinity of children at church or attend house/cell group meetings where there are children in the home.
- An offender should never be allowed to work with children and young people
- They should not hold positions of leadership or responsibility where seen by children within the church because a child is likely to regard them as someone they can trust.
- they should not undertake any activity where they might be seen as in a position of trust. eg giving books out at the door, greeting people, reading the lesson, leading prayers or a

bible study, because a child is likely to regard them as someone they can trust.

**'D':** 'Working to a contract is a helpful and necessary procedure for ex-offenders in the church. It helped me know what I could and couldn't do'

**Pastor:** 'In the beginning I found myself policing him, thinking and worrying whether it was going to work. Now, my pastoral team take care of this and I am more relaxed'.

Internet sexual offending includes not only indecent images of children but also online grooming, so helping an offender with online boundaries may also be needed.

## **What about forgiveness?**

An offender needs pastoral care to help them deal with the spiritual and emotional aspects of their life. They may feel that their sins are too awful for God to forgive, that they can never change or be healed of their own hurts. A pastor or carer needs to distinguish between forgiveness by God and forgiveness offered to the offender by those abused. Offenders do not always appreciate that the consequences of their behaviour can be devastating for the person(s) involved and forgiveness by the victim may take a considerable time. Some may choose not to forgive. Offenders need to know that they have no inherent right to be forgiven by those they have harmed.

An offender may feel that they could never forgive themselves for their actions. In acknowledging they have done wrong they need to know that God forgives them and because of this they can forgive themselves. That is not to say they should forget what has happened and neither should the church. One offender commented that remembering

was a reminder to keep certain boundaries so that he would not be tempted to re-offend.

## **What about confidentiality?**

Confidentiality is an important principle in any dealings with people in pastoral situations. However, where children's safety may be compromised, confidentiality has to take second place to protecting children. Open communication with the person who has offended and sharing information with the police and probation service are vital for the protection of children. A church leader may be given confidential information by one of the statutory agencies that cannot be shared with the wider church. However, leaders responsible for children can be made aware of any boundaries that are in place without being given details of the offender's history.

## **What about people who've never been convicted of an offence?**

Most people who offend against children are not convicted. We know this by the number of adults admitting to unreported sexual offences against them as children and the number of cases reported to the police actually resulting in a conviction (about 5%). Even if an allegation is reported to the police, most are denied by the accused, and the case generally won't reach court if, for example, there is a lack of corroborative evidence or because it is not in the interests of the child or adult victim to take the matter further. For a case that reaches court, it is necessary for a jury to find someone guilty 'beyond all reasonable doubt'. Unless the jury agree on a verdict, the person will be found not guilty.

Where there are reasonable grounds for concern, churches will still need to respond even if the allegation is denied and in particular by applying appropriate boundaries. Failure to do so could place children at risk and it is also in the interests of someone who feels they have been falsely accused to work within given boundaries in order to minimise the possibility of further allegations.

## **Support for offenders - not an optional extra**

Supporting offenders safely in the church is fundamental if children are to be protected from abuse. Child protection policies and good working practice are vital (see CCPAS safeguarding manual 'Safe and Secure'). If general procedures are in place and working, spelling out, for example, who has access to the crèche, then sudden changes do not have to be initiated immediately a person with a known problem comes to church. Having said this it is important, as a matter of course, to review policies and procedures on a regular basis, whether or not a known offender joins the church.

We cannot be all things to all people. For example, a church with one meeting room overflowing with children cannot provide appropriately for a high risk offender. In this situation the church could seek the help of another local church who may be in a better position to provide a safer environment. Alternatively, the church may minister to an individual outside of public meetings. For example, in some situations offenders have been restricted to attendance at an all-male cell group.

## Part of a bigger package

The help and pastoral support available in the church needs to run alongside the monitoring of the individual by police and probation. Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA) exist in all areas. MAPPA places a duty on the police, the probation service and the prison authorities to assess and manage risks posed by offenders in every community in England and Wales. Similar arrangements apply elsewhere in the UK. They do this work in partnership with other agencies including health services, housing, social services etc. Where an offender is subject to a supervision plan it will be vital for churches to work closely with these agencies both in order to reduce risk and also to understand how the church can positively contribute to the supervision plan as well as the offender's relapse prevention or "better life" plan.

MAPPA guidance issued in 2009 by National Offender Management Service (NOMS) Public Protection Unit, Section 6.5, 'Offenders and Worship', stresses that MAPPA should work in partnership with places

of worship and "that religious leaders should be provided with sufficient information to protect their congregation".

**"D":** Being around people who are secure, stable and caring has given me a fresh start'.



## **Further help and resources**

The UK has led the world in sexual offending treatment programmes. There are accredited programmes in many prisons as well as community-based services. Research shows that those who complete treatment are less likely to fantasise about children or deny they harmed their victims, and are therefore less likely to re-offend. It is vital that any help provided by the church is not seen as a substitute for working with the statutory agencies. It will also be important in any contract arrangement with an offender to emphasise keeping to agreed programmes and meeting the expectations of supervising agencies. If we are to gain full co-operation from an offender it is important that the Agreement we put in place is discussed and agreed with them, possibly asking them what they think should be helpfully included, and is proportional to the risk they pose, reflects their pattern of offending and also their needs in terms of pastoral support.

Over the years, CCPAS has pioneered work with sexual offenders in churches. This whole area is dealt with in detail in our safeguarding manual 'Safe and Secure'. It covers all the issues outlined above including working with perpetrators, and the model contract suggested between church and offender has been adopted by a number of mainstream denominations and many individual churches. CCPAS, in association with the Lucy Faithfull Foundation, have also produced a DVD training programme for churches on understanding and working with sexual offenders. We will also provide help and support in regard to individual cases which might include meeting with church leadership teams to help them deal with such issues and in some areas deliver direct training in working with sexual offenders in the church context.

### **6.5 Offenders and Worship**

## **Extract from MAPPA\* Guidance 2009 (issued to police and probation)**

It is essential that we assist religious communities to put in place effective arrangements, which allow them to ensure they are able to protect their community whilst allowing the offender to maintain their right to worship, but in a safe way. The place of worship and religious leader should be provided with sufficient information to protect their congregation.

Where an RSO (Registered Sex Offender), who has committed offences against children, or other offenders who present a risk of harm to children and/or other identified victims wishes to continue to practice their religion, through attending services and/or being part of their faith community, the offender/case manager must ensure that they have fully assessed the potential risk of harm that this could present.

There should always be a discussion with the offender regarding the need to protect children/identified victims (unless this places the victim at greater risk) who may also be present, at services and/or events, from harm. The offender needs to be aware that information will be disclosed to the religious organisation and that they (the offender) will be required to agree to, and sign, a 'contract' of behaviour. Where an offender is

unwilling to give this undertaking, the OM (Offender Manager) and police should consider whether to seek a restrictive condition on a licence or in a Sexual Offences Prevention Order (SOPO) to prevent the offender being in a place of worship. The outcome of this decision must be recorded in the national sexual offender database.

**“Any breaches of the ‘contract’ with the offender must be reported to the offender/case manager.”**

The guidance goes on to give details of main churches and other religious groups and contact details, and supplies information regarding CCPAS and our resources and advises authorities to contact us for advice in relation to faith organisations.

*\*Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA) are responsible for the assessment and on-going management of all Registered Sex Offenders (RSOs), and other sexual offenders who present a recognised risk, as well as violent offenders. MAPPA brings together the Police, Probation and Prison Services locally into what is known as the MAPPA Responsible Authority. Whilst the above guidance relates to England and Wales, similar arrangements exist throughout the UK.*

Sexual offenders are not born as sexual offenders. Their sexual attraction to children developed mainly through their childhood experiences of abuse, be it emotional, physical, mental or sexual. They are typically people with low self esteem, emotionally lonely and unable to relate deeply to adults, and who, to quote a probation officer, feel "powerless to change and hopeless". Many are full of shame for their activities, and that sense of shame may actually drive their sexual offending cycle. All of these characteristics, and more

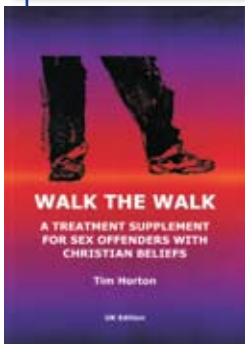
we have not mentioned, reflect what has come to be known in some Christian circles as an "orphan heart" and this gives us clues as to how we might fruitfully help them, for all of them are loved by God. The mandate for Christ's life, which we have inherited, was to heal the brokenhearted, set captives free, bring recovery of sight to the blind (self-deceived people?), to proclaim the Lord's favour etc. (Isaiah 61). Please contact Sanctuary if you would like details of material which could help you in that task.



### **SOS - Supporting Offenders Safely**

This DVD examines the issues and includes understanding patterns of sexual offending behaviour, risk assessment and written contracts plus the treatment, pastoral care and counselling of sex offenders in a church setting.

**Cost: £10 for CCPAS Members and £15 for Non-members**



### **Walk the Walk**

Tim Horton (Sanctuary)

A treatment supplement for sex offenders with Christian beliefs.

A4 80pp £6.00

**For more information, see our website at [www.ccpas.co.uk](http://www.ccpas.co.uk)**

## Useful Organisations

**CCPAS** - Child protection support, training and policy/practice issues including work with sexual offenders.

Tel: 0845 120 4550

Email: [info@ccpas.co.uk](mailto:info@ccpas.co.uk)

Web: [www.ccpas.co.uk](http://www.ccpas.co.uk)

### **The Lucy Faithfull Foundation**

- A national child protection agency working with adult male and female perpetrators of child sexual abuse. Lucy Faithfull Foundation run Circles of Support (see also below).

Tel: 01527 591 922

Web: [www.lucyfaithfull.co.uk](http://www.lucyfaithfull.co.uk)

**Circles of Support and Accountability** - A Community support system for sexual offenders.

Tel: 0118 950 0068

Email: [info@circles-uk.org.uk](mailto:info@circles-uk.org.uk)

**Stop It Now!** - A national campaign that aims to prevent child abuse by encouraging offenders to seek help. It also provides adults with information to help protect children.

Helpline: 0808 1000 900

Email: [help@stopitnow.org.uk](mailto:help@stopitnow.org.uk)

Web: [www.stopitnow.org.uk](http://www.stopitnow.org.uk)

**NSPCC** - A National Child Protection Charity

Helpline: 0808 800 5000

Email: [help@nspcc.org.uk](mailto:help@nspcc.org.uk)

Web: [www.nspcc.org.uk](http://www.nspcc.org.uk)

**This is one of an expanding series of  
Help... booklets published by CCPAS including:**

**Help... someone I care about may be a sex offender**

**Help... How can I work with children and young people  
displaying sexually harmful behaviour?**

**See CCPAS website for more details [www.ccpas.co.uk](http://www.ccpas.co.uk)**



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