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YOUR CHURCH

MINISTRY

Integrating Sex Offenders At Church

Balancing inclusion and safety in difficult situations.

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In a recent survey of nearly 3,000 church leaders, an overwhelming number said they believe churches should welcome known sex offenders, despite their criminal pasts.

Nearly 80 percent said sex offenders should belong to a church, while only 3 percent thought they should be completely excluded, according to the "Sex Offenders in the Church" survey conducted by Christianity Today International, Your Church Today's publisher.

The purpose of the research, which took place online in April 2010, was to learn the attitudes and actions churches are taking to help integrate known sex offenders into their faith communities. The 2,864 people who participated in the survey included ordained church leaders (15 percent), church staff (20 percent), and lay leaders (43 percent).

With so many church leaders apparently willing to make a place in the pews for known offenders, a significant question arises: How can they do this and still keep their congregants safe? The following four highlights from the research may help provide an answer:

1. Not all sex offenses are the same.

Say "sex offender" and most people immediately assume "pedophile." While child molestation is a sex offense, many other crimes also fall under the definition of the term. For the "Sex Offenders in the Church" survey, sex offenders were defined as: "One who has committed a sex crime that involves any illegal or coerced sexual activity, such as sexual assault, sexual battery, sexual abuse, rape, statutory rape, date rape, prostitution, as well as indecent exposure, and lewd acts, whether against a child or adult."

More than half of the survey respondents felt that standards for a sex offender's participation at church should be determined, in part, by the seriousness of their crime. Richard Hammar, a noted church legal expert and senior editorial advisor for Your Church Today, affirms that not all sex offenses pose the same degree of risk. However, in the article "Sex Offenders in the Church" (Church Law & Tax Report, Sept/Oct 2010), he cautioned churches about the potential danger of "erring on the side of mercy" in dealing with known offenders. "Many sex offenders are classified as 'tier 1' on a sex offender registry," he said, "not because they committed a lesser offense, but because they 'plea bargained' down to a tier 1 offense."

If a church allows a known offender to serve with children or youth, and this individual reoffends while on church property, Hammar said a jury likely will be incredulous that a church would expose its most vulnerable members to such a risk, regardless of whether the offender only had a minor sex offense in his past.

"No court has exonerated a church from liability for the molestation of a child on the ground that the offender was merely a tier 1 offender who did not impose a duty on the church to implement reasonable restrictions," he said.

So while not all sex offenses are the same, a jury won't necessarily see it that way. "The mere inclusion of a person on a sex offender registry is likely to be viewed by most juries as a serious risk warranting reasonable precautions and restrictions," Hammar said.

2. Establish policies before you need them.

Hammar said he suggests creating "reasonable precautions and restrictions." Ideally, churches should establish policies and practices regarding allowing sex offenders to be part of the church *before* they have to deal with the issue. Although one-third (34 percent) of survey respondents said they are not aware of a known offender in their church, they likely will be in the future. There are nearly 550,000 registered sex offenders in the United States, and the number continues to rise. For those churches in the survey that have encountered an offender at church, the first thing they did when they learned about the offender was to pray (43 percent), followed by talking to elders (39 percent) and talking to staff (39 percent).

Twenty-three percent have drafted conditional attendance agreements (also called "covenant agreements" at some churches). These include safety stipulations, such as being chaperoned at all times while on church property, and maintaining accountability with specific people in the church. (For a sample covenant agreement and sex offender attendance policy, see the downloadable training resource "Sex Offenders in the Church," available on YourChurchResources.com).

3. Repentance is a good sign, but be cautious.

Most church leaders in the survey said they believe offenders deserve a place in the faith community. Nearly 80 percent said that a registered sex offender should be allowed to attend church under continuous supervision and with appropriate limitations. When asked what influences their opinion on whether a former sex offender should be allowed to participate in church, 83 percent said a repentant attitude would be the number one factor.

Some sex offenders, particularly pedophiles, are notoriously good liars, though. Clinical psychologist Anna Salter offers a word of caution from her 2003 book *Predators: Pedophiles, Rapists and Other Sex Offenders*: "Decades of research have demonstrated that people cannot reliably tell who is lying. Many offenders report that religious people are even easier to fool than most people."

While a repentant attitude is a necessary and healthy sign of change in a person's life, it's a subjective basis for making such a critical decision. Many churches look to the facts of one's past and the patterns they have established to ensure positive, ongoing change. Hammar also said he advises churches to learn the terms of an offender's parole or probation, both to help keep the offender accountable to the law as well as to avoid inadvertently making an offender break their agreement. Many sex offenders are not allowed to attend church or visit any place where children are present.

4. Recovery is hard

It's hard for the sex offender, and it's hard for the few churches that try to provide recovery ministries, especially ones dealing with sexual addictions. Although survey respondents overwhelmingly signaled a desire for the church to be part of an offender's re-entry and recovery process, nearly a quarter (24 percent) report that they are doing nothing to provide a church-based recovery ministry to people with sexual addictions. Nearly half (49 percent) provide referrals to outside recovery ministries.

According to survey results, 62 percent said they either are not sure or do not believe a sex offender can be rehabilitated to the point where they no longer pose a threat to others. The Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers (ATSA), the largest professional organization on treating sex offenders, states on its website that "although many, if not most, sexual abusers are treatable, there is no known 'cure.' Management of sexually abusive behavior is a lifelong task for some sexual abusers." The organization says repeat sexual crimes can be reduced significantly through prevention, assessment, treatment, supervision, and collaboration involving all parties.

Marian V. Liataud is resources editor for Christianity Today International's Church Management Team. She edited *Reducing the Risk*, 3rd Edition, and the training resource "Sex Offenders in the Church." Both are available at YourChurchResources.com.

Additional Resources by Christianity Today International

- **Executive Report: Sex Offenders in the Church Survey.** Free results and summary of the national survey on sex offenders commissioned by Christianity Today International in 2010. Available on YourChurchResources.com.
- **Feature Report: Sex Offenders in Church.** Richard Hammar's feature article in the September/October issue of Church Law & Tax Report. Available for \$12.95 on YourChurchResources.com.
- **Sex Offenders in the Church.** A downloadable training resource for church leaders. Available for \$14.95 on YourChurchResources.com.
- **Juvenile Sex Offenders in the Church.** A downloadable training resource for church leaders. Available for \$14.95 on YourChurchResources.com.
- **Reducing the Risk:** Keeping Your Ministry Safe from Child Sexual Abuse. Child protection training curriculum for churches. Available on ReducingTheRisk.com.

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