

Methodist Conference 2000

38. The Church and Sex Offenders

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

a. Commentary on the Methodist Church's current Safeguarding procedures

The current position in the Methodist Church, under S.O 010 (2), is that

- (i) no person who has been convicted of or has received a formal caution from the police concerning an offence mentioned in the First Schedule to the Children and Young Persons Act 1933 shall undertake work with children and young persons in the life of the Church;
- (ii) no person who has been convicted of or has received a formal caution from the police concerning sexual offences against children shall be appointed to any office, post or responsibility or engaged under any contract to which this sub-clause applies.

The working party wish to affirm their support of this Standing Order, for reasons stated in section 5b of this report.

The working party felt that consideration should be given as to whether there is an anomaly to be addressed in the way we treat sex offenders against adults differently from those who offend against children.

The working part considered how to respond in situations where a convicted or cautioned offender continues to protest his innocence and where some members of the church support his claim. We believe that if a person has been convicted or received an official police caution the church can only work on the basis of that history and not accept a person's story that they were 'framed' as a basis for ignoring the conviction or the caution. While there clearly have been miscarriages of justice in our legal system, there are also cases of guilty people continuing to proclaim their innocence (and of sex offenders minimizing or denying what they did). If the offender believes an injustice has been done there are appropriate ways forward, to seek to have the conviction overturned and their name formally cleared. Until such time as that happens, the church has to work with the record as it exists.

b. Procedures necessary for offenders to be involved in a church community

The notice of motion describes the church as 'a community of love, forgiveness and reconciliation, committed to the restoration of broken people and communities.' It clearly has a role to play in offering pastoral support and care to those in the local church and community who have committed sexual offences. What is more, a relatively high proportion of sex offenders have been involved in the life and worship of the prison chapel and would hope to continue their involvement in Christian worship and fellowship on release. Indeed, many sex offenders see the church as having a significant part to play in helping them rebuild their lives. Like everyone else, such offenders have much both to receive and contribute within the life of a local church community and their participation in the worship and fellowship of a local church enables faith to grow and develop. For the protection of the church community, survivors, and particularly children and young people, but also for the protection of the offender (who needs not to be put in situations where he could be vulnerable to accusation or to the opportunity to reoffend) it will be important that the basis of their involvement in a local church is clearly understood and stated.

We suggest Methodist churches should adopt the following procedure:

i. Pre-release

Where the offender is approaching release from prison, it will be important wherever possible for the chaplain of the prison to be in contact with the

minister of the local church and circuit where the offender hopes to settle on release. If the circuit minister is aware of the arrival of a sex offender but has not heard from the prison chaplain, the minister should try to make contact with the chaplain, who may be able to describe the treatment received by the offender and the kind of programme that will be in place to help him return to the community. It may be possible for a visit to be arranged so that the minister can meet the chaplain and the offender. It will also be crucial for those responsible in the local church to be in contact with the local risk management panel, the offender's probation officer and the police, so that any agreement regarding involvement in the local church is known about and seen as part of the multi-agency, multi-disciplinary approach to the oversight of the offender upon release from prison. In approaching and seeking to work with secular agencies there may be some initial suspicion and it may help to provide the agency with a copy of the Methodist Church's procedure or even this whole report, to demonstrate the Church's willingness to work together with other agencies in the responsibility for sex offenders and the protection of potential victims. (See Recommendation 4.)

For known sex offenders already living in the community and involved in the life of the church, the same provisions should be made.

ii. Setting up a small group within the church

A small group should be set up, consisting of approximately five persons, including the minister, persons who have agreed to offer pastoral support for the offender and accompany them in worship and other church activities, someone with expertise or experience in this field and someone to represent the wider church community. The group should acquaint itself with any therapeutic programme the offender has undergone or will continue to be part of. The group should meet the offender, their probation officer and other appropriate people so that clear boundaries can be established for the protection of children and young people and to reduce the likelihood of false allegations or suspicions. This group will, at best, operate alongside other agencies in a multi-agency approach to the offender's rehabilitation.

iii. Carrying out a risk assessment

One of the first tasks of the small group will be to carry out a risk assessment. This will involve looking at the church building and activities with a view to identifying potential risks that will need to be guarded against or which could lead to the offender being vulnerable to allegations. The offender's probation officer or another member of the risk management panel may be willing to help with this assessment as part of their arrangements for the offender. Having identified the potential risks the group needs to consider how they can be minimized either by a change in practice or by monitoring or restricting the offender's participation in any particular activities. The results of the risk assessment will lead to the creation of an agreed 'contract' with the offender.

iv. Writing a contract

When the boundaries and terms of involvement have been discussed and agreed with the offender, they should be written into a contract (see below). While a written contract sounds very formal, sex offenders can be manipulative and test boundaries. A written contract clarifies the terms on which the person is involved in the life of the church. The contract should involve the person's family and partner who may also be attending church and need to be informed. It might begin by setting out the pastoral support and care being offered by the church and then move on to other conditions, such as some of the following examples:

- * I will never allow myself to be in a situation where I am alone with children/young people
- * I will attend meetings/house groups as directed by the small group
- * I will sit where directed in the church and will not place myself in the vicinity of children and young people

- * I will not enter certain parts of the building designated by the small group, nor any area where children's activities are in progress
- * I will decline invitations of hospitality where there are children in the home
- * I accept that 'x' and 'y' will sit with me during church activities, accompanying me when I need to use other facilities. They will know that I am a Schedule I offender/registered with the police under the terms of the Sex Offenders Act
- * I accept that 'z' will provide me with pastoral care
- * I accept that there are certain people who will need to be told of my circumstances in order for them to protect the children/young people for whom they care
- * I accept that contact will need to be made with my probation officer, who will meet with church leaders or members of the small group as and when necessary
- * I understand that if I do not keep to these conditions, then I may be banned from attending the church, and in such circumstances the church leaders may choose to inform the statutory agencies (eg probation and social services) and any other relevant organisation, and the church congregation
- * I understand that any other concerns will be taken seriously and reported
- * I understand that this contract will be reviewed regularly every _____ months and will remain for an indefinite period.

(adapted from *Guidance to Churches: protecting children and appointing children's workers*, Churches Child Protection Advisory Service)

The document needs to be signed and dated by the offender and by the church representatives.

v. *Small group to meet regularly*

The small group should continue to meet the individual from time to time to review the arrangement and address any concerns. If boundaries are not being kept, or if the contract is not being kept in other ways, it is important to address the problem. (In extreme cases, where boundaries continue not to be kept, it may be necessary to prohibit the offender from coming on the premises.) When officers or ministers change in the church it will be important to ensure continuity of awareness and provision of pastoral support for the offender.

vi. *Making people aware - who needs to know what?*

A sex offender coming to join a congregation may not want people to know his history. One of the important matters for the small group and the offender will be an agreement on who needs to know. Without agreement on this, it will not be possible for the offender to join the congregation. Key people, especially those responsible for leading children's and young people's groups, need to know that the person is attending the church, that he should not be having contact with the children and that he should never be on his own with children and young people.

There is much to be said for explaining the circumstances to the whole congregation, to promote understanding and support for the individual but also to ensure that church members do not unwittingly allow children contact with the individual concerned. However, this needs to be weighed against any need for confidentiality or pastoral sensitivity. It will be important to obtain advice from the statutory agencies and the risk management panel. The need to know must be balanced with the danger that the offender may be hounded out of the community (to his detriment and to the greater danger of other children if he decides to maintain a lower profile next time around).

Always we should promote awareness within the church of what would happen if a sex offender joined the congregation. It could be explained that from time to time this might happen and, if it does, then the procedures are as described in

this report (i.e. that people who need to know because they work with children in the church are informed; the church liaises with other concerned agencies; a small group will link with the offender; there will be a contract; arrangements will be reviewed regularly.) This information is particularly important to survivors. They are likely to ask (and need to know) how they will be kept safe. Who can they go and talk to if they feel frightened, worried or hurt?

c. General points

i. Young offenders

Approximately one third of sex offenders are adolescents. With young offenders, as with adults, the church needs to liaise with the risk management panel and look at how to reduce future risk. The young offender will need to sign a contract and so will those with parental responsibility for them.

ii. Developing good practice

The general need for the Church to adopt good practice in child protection terms cannot be over-emphasized. Adopting the Safeguarding procedures both helps deal with known offenders and offers the best possible safeguard against the activities of offenders who are not known about and who have not been caught.

Support

The nature of sexual abuse and offending is such as to raise very emotional and difficult situations that can be stressful for all. It is important for those with responsibilities to have appropriate support networks. One of these networks is likely to include members of other agencies with responsibilities for sex offenders in the community (especially Police and Probation). Another will be within the church, where there is developing experience and expertise in this area of work. Each District should develop a team of those who can offer consultancy and support where necessary (including members of a Taking Care group where there is one, Training and Development Officer, Child Protection Officer, etc.)

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