

THE CHURCH, THE SEX OFFENDER, AND RECONCILIATION

By Bob Van Domelen

INTRODUCTION & A BRIEF HISTORY

I returned home from prison in December of 1988, having been paroled after serving three years of a five-year sentence for sexual molestation. My return also marked the beginning of a 10-year sentence of parole under supervision, and when that was completed, stipulations related to Megan's Law went into effect. I first started writing this introduction in November 2000. At that time, I was told that I would be subject to Megan's Law notification in Wisconsin for 15 years. By mid-2001 legislators changed that 15-year sentence to one that will remain for the rest of my life.

It's possible that some of you reading this will be a little surprised that I only received a five-year prison sentence. Were my case to appear before a judge today, the sentence would be two to three times that.

In 1989, I was allowed to attend weekly Broken Yoke Ministries support group meetings in Madison, WI, about 65 miles from where I lived. A year later, the founder of that group resigned and the leadership fell to me.

Although Broken Yoke is primarily structured as a ministry outreach to those who struggle with homosexuality, God has opened doors for me to become involved in a ministry to sex offenders such as I was. This part of my ministry started slowly with a mention of my crime in a talk on homosexuality, and grew to where I have been blessed to speak at conferences throughout the United States.

In the early 90s, Broken Yoke was producing a bimonthly newsletter, *Wellspring*, dealing with the homosexual issue. Soon letters started to come to the ministry from inmates around the country. Some were seeking help coping with same sex attractions but the majority of letters came from men and women guilty of molesting children. In 1997, the newsletter *Into the Light* was begun as an attempt to offer hope and encouragement to sex offenders.

As the newsletter readership grew, so did the opportunities to share my story. A copy of my testimony was run in Prison Fellowship's *Inside Journal*, a bimonthly newspaper with readers in most of this country's prisons. The response to that printing doubled the circulation of *Into the Light*. A year later, the same testimony was run in *Christian Inmate News*; an interview with *Charisma Online* followed, and circulation continued to grow. That first mailing of 43 copies has grown over the course of 21 editions to just over 1500, reaching inmates in over 400 institutions.

Other opportunities came for sharing, including *Family Circle Magazine*, *Charisma Online*, *Charisma Magazine*, and *Citizen Magazine*. Additionally, I have spoken at a number of Exodus International conferences around the country, have been interviewed for a series of programs for *Focus on the Family* with Dr. James Dobson, and have served as keynote speaker for a conference on prison ministry to sex offenders in Orlando, FL. In 2001, I was keynote speaker for a two-day conference on pedophilia in Amsterdam.

This booklet is not an effort to minimize or excuse any act of molestation, for no act of such devastation can be excused. I believe, however, that the healing process for victims and molesters is circular. Molesters who themselves have been abused need the opportunity to deal

with what happened to them as children in order to understand the impact on the victims they created. Finding their own healing will strengthen their resolve.

Victims need to know that, should their abusers be released and return to the same community, the persons who molested them might well have changed and are intent on living that change. I don't suggest that victim and abuser need to be friends (as that should never be seen as a goal), but that a victim's stomach should not jump at the mere sight of a known offender.

This book is meant to help churches address simple "What if" kinds of questions: "What if a sex offender seeks to be a part of our faith community?" or "What if our church finds one of its members has abused a child and is still in this church?" These questions are best answered when emotions are calm, but all too often it is the reality of abuse that forces the conversations.

What will the *church* do? Is the only alternative to deny sex offenders admittance to church membership? And if a sex offender is allowed to attend services, what protections need to be in place to create a safe environment for victims as well as for the children of any faith community?

In 1997, the United Methodist Church of England established a work committee to determine appropriate ministry to those convicted of sexual offenses. Of primary importance to the committee was the formation of safeguarding guidelines while at the same time addressing a resolution that sex offenders are not allowed to hold office within the church.

I will be referring to the results of that committee rather than completely reinventing a process that has much merit. While I hope to touch on specifics from this report, I would recommend those sections of their report labeled "What We Know About Sex Offending" and "Some Theological Questions" in particular as critical to the whole issue of ministering to sex offenders within a church structure. The theological questions in that report are really at the core of this whole effort, so a study of that section would benefit everyone. The complete report can be found on the Internet at:

www.methodist.org.uk/information/sexoffenders.htm

I would recommend printing the report in its entirety and using it as a discussion vehicle.

By attempting to focus on this issue I hope to provide some helpful guidelines for churches wishing to protect their children. Those individuals who have already molested children have been identified and can be monitored. It is much more difficult to identify someone with an unnatural predisposition toward children who has not self-disclosed, but there *are* some steps that will help.

Much of what I hope to share is basic common sense and might appear to be too mundane to match the topic, but I can assure you that the solutions *are* somewhat simple. It's the application of them that might be more difficult.

I would encourage the reader to obtain a copy of *Help for Adults Attracted to Children* (Exodus International or Regeneration Books) for definitions of pedophilia, ephebophilia, and some of the causes of both conditions. It will not be the purpose of this booklet to restate that information. A list of resources can be found at the end of this booklet.

To simplify matters, I will use the masculine pronoun throughout this document when referring to one accused of sexual molestation as statistics clearly show the majority of offenders are male. If a statement could apply equally to both, the combination he/she or him/her will be used.

Names that are indicated with an asterisk (*) are fictitious and used only by example. Any similarity to known individuals of the same name is purely coincidental.

I dedicate this booklet to my wife, Cathie, without whose love and support I would not have encountered the depth of God's love as I have. I love you, Cathie!

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THE CHURCH, THE SEX OFFENDER, AND RECONCILIATION

GETTING STARTED

CHAPTER 1

For the majority of people, the church has always been a safe haven, a place where people gathered to give praise to God and to find support and encouragement through fellowship. No matter how bad things got in the world outside, there was peace to be found inside the house of God.

I was very involved in my own church and loved being part of worship. If anyone suspected my dark secret, I was not aware of his or her suspicions. Part of my ignorance of the feelings others might have had stemmed from my own self-centered approach to life. I could not see beyond my own selfish needs. Another part of the problem can be attributed to the fact that few in the church want to give voice to feelings they might have about another person that might connect the person in question to child molestation. With recent revelations about abuse by priests, however, this attitude is changing.

There is a natural anger or rage that surfaces when people learn that a child has been molested, and I think those emotions are intensified when the abuse is perpetrated by someone within the church. If the offender is also the pastor, the defilement is more pronounced in the mind of the congregation.

When I speak at conferences or church gatherings, I suggest the need for churches to bring up the subject of child molestation in a series of meetings *before* there is any apparent need to do so. I call these meetings “What if” sessions. I have spoken to some pastors who have told me that this idea would not work for them, yet they see the merit of the discussions and would encourage them.

Unfortunately, most people find the topic extremely distressing and emotionally charged. As a result, they become like those who were invited to the great banquet (Luke 14.16ff), making excuses as to why they could not come. I am not standing in judgment of this kind of response because the topic of molestation is never mentioned without significant turmoil for many. The way it ends up working in some churches is that a committee is formed to discuss the issue and the balance of the church is glad to be off the hook.

These “What if” sessions should include some of the following questions:

- What resources (written/audio/visual) are available in the church’s resource library?
- What Internet sites provide useful information and/or good links to other resources?
- Is a denominational policy statement available that will assist in the “What if” discussions?
- Presuming the offender is a member of the congregation, what information (*if any*) will be shared with the congregation should news of an assault become public knowledge? If a policy is agreed upon, it should be shared with the church body as part of a packet of information.
- What response will the church have to the victim immediately after allegations of abuse become public? What will be the response to the offender?
- Can the church move beyond preventative maintenance for an offender and into a vision of healing and change and what it will take for that to happen? [Note: This is truly the heart of the reconciliation process.]

The first “What if” session might well point to the fact that none of the resource needs listed above is currently available. If that’s the case, I would suggest forming small groups of individuals willing to seek answers before the next session.

If the goal of the “What if” sessions is to *understand and be able to communicate definitive information related to child molestation*, the meeting will very easily get weighed down and eventually surrender to the sheer volume of material. My wife often told our children, “A smart person is not one who knows all the answers. A smart person is one who knows where to find all the answers.” The church will never be an expert on pedophilia but it should know where to find appropriate resources on that topic.

I doubt that a book could be written which would include all of the variations of and possibilities for sexual abuse to occur. I know that some will wonder if the rules of response should be different if the person is a parent, relative, pastor, or complete stranger. In reality there is one common thread—a child has been victimized. It’s this common thread that should dictate any church response.

Notes:

THE NEEDS OF VICTIMS

CHAPTER 2

There is going to be significant conflict for any child who is a victim in an abuse situation. I offer the following as a starter list and encourage further discussion in both general and specific terms as it would relate to abuse.

- Children need the assurance of calm rather than panic when they have been victimized or when word of molestation surfaces. The degree of emotional intensity on the part of parents and other adults involved during this time could easily add another layer of damage to an already abused child.
- Many victims feel the abuse would not have happened had they not said or done something to provoke the act.
- The atmosphere around a victim after abuse is often charged with anger the child doesn't fully understand. "Why can't things return to normal?" is something many victims feel but cannot express clearly.
- Life is turned upside down for the child when abuse is disclosed and the child sees a host of strangers probing into what happened.
- Children do not understand the consequences of their being abused and the likely consequence of punishment for the offender. Prison and possibly a permanent separation are issues that will need to be considered. This will be especially true if the offender is a family member.
- There are some who will try to talk a victim into forgiving the offender as the Christian thing to do. I think that such an approach is another form of victimization if such subtle force is applied.

If "What if" meetings have taken place, there will be a list available of counselors/medical willing and able to offer help. These are individuals who can be relied upon to restore a sense of trust in adults to a child needing to feel safe.

Should an occurrence of molestation be disclosed to a pastor, there are things the pastor should do. While there is no single list of steps that will be or should be the same in every instance, there are general steps that should be considered as part of a standing process the pastor and the church will use.

- The abuse should be reported. Period. Start with the family doctor, your minister, or your local Social Services office and remember that there is a child involved. The anger that surfaces when you first learn of abuse could easily become so focused that revenge rather than concern for the child could be a driving force in your actions and comments.
- It is unwise to keep this quiet on the pretense that the church can handle the abuse without involving civil authority. Some churches erroneously believe that the reputation of the church itself is at stake and perhaps will be seen in an unfavorable light. The in-house approach sends a mixed message to both victim and offender, but especially to the victim.
- Most churches have a very efficient grapevine of information. For this reason, the truth should not be sidestepped but neither should every detail be made available. This is one of those issues that should be discussed in the "What if" sessions. The congregation will know the procedure concerning what will be shared and what will not.

Notes:

THE NEEDS OF OFFENDERS

CHAPTER 3

Statistically, those who abuse do not have lives that are “all together” or free of conflict. Many were themselves abused physically, sexually, or emotionally as children. It could be argued that sexual molestation is part of a vicious cycle, and unless care is taken for this new victim, the cycle might continue.

When an abuser is well known or well liked, the church response is usually one of shock or disbelief. Some might go so far as to even deny the possibility that the abuser would even consider such an act. If the abuser is less well known or liked, the response might sound something like “I always knew there was something not quite right about him (or her).”

In these two examples, individual reaction will depend on a personal relationship or lack of a relationship with the abuser. If the abuser is liked or held in esteem, people might offer words of encouragement or support without too much commitment. An abuser who is not liked or is little known might be shunned.

Wives

I have learned from personal experience as well as from those I have met or spoken to that the wife of an offender will face an especially difficult time. People are convinced that she “must have known what her husband was doing.” “Why didn’t she stop him?” The truth is that most wives really didn’t know what was happening, but they are often as shunned as their husbands. Those who decide to try to save the marriage are almost always treated as out of touch with reality.

Guilty or Presumed Guilty

It is normally presumed that accusations of child molestation can be substantiated, so we tend to presume that the person charged is guilty. There is always the possibility that the charges are either false or in some cases that the police have the wrong person, so great care should be taken to protect everyone’s rights.

More often than not, a charge of molestation sets a number of consequences in motion for the accused offender.

- Laid off at work
- Media coverage (name and photo if the victim is not a member of the family)
- Asked to not attend services at church
- Physical and psychological crises

The church response to the offender in the immediate aftermath of allegation should be another issue discussed in the “What if” sessions. If there is a constant in most situations of this nature (according to those I have known) it would be that the church all too often disappears in terms of any support for one accused.

Remembering that the needs of the victim come first is not the same as saying the offender has no needs that can be met by the church. The church can:

- let the offender know that the church is keeping him in their prayers. At the same time, encourage the offender to be in prayer for the church as it struggles with what happened. [Note: It took me some time to see that the children I molested were not the only victims. I had harmed the church body.]

- call to see if there is any practical need that can be met by church members for the offender *or* his family.
- meet with the offender to discuss church participation options or restrictions. If it might be better for him not to attend services, alternatives should be suggested. The answer for the offender is not to run *from* God and the church but to run *toward* God and the church.

Other issues related more to an offender's family should be considered in light of what the church can do as a witness for and an example of Christ's love.

- The offender's wife and children (if he is married) are facing complex issues with regard to simple survival. The community reaction might be so pronounced as to make movement within the community difficult and emotionally scarring. In my family's situation I learned that my children faced considerable alienation at school because of my crimes, so asking the mother how the children are doing in school would be a good thing. Don't forget to ask her how *she* feels and how *she* is coping.
- An occasional supportive note to the family will be appreciated and will let them know you care and are praying for them. Some people may fear that such support could be interpreted as condoning the offender's behavior, but I don't believe a supportive Christian response ever condones sin.
- While often shared in sermons or Bible studies, the adage "Hate the sin, love the sinner" gets to the core of the reconciliation process.

Notes:

BACK TO NORMAL?

CHAPTER FOUR

It is very easy to view an offender being sent to prison with a “Well, that’s that. Let’s get on with life again” attitude. There are many offenders who write to me with stories of being deserted by the churches they attended, of families struggling to make ends meet, and of victims being considered normal again just because the scars of the abuse are no longer openly visible to others.

This chapter will explore some of the issues that occur after there has been some legal resolution to the charge of sexual assault, the dust has settled a bit, and the local paper has stopped printing accounts of what has happened.

Rather than rest on the original “What if” conversations held *before* any sign of abuse was evident, pastors should now encourage church members to repeat the process in light of what has actually happened.

- What decisions made in the original conversations proved to be the correct decisions? Which did not?
- What things should the church have done but didn’t because no one thought of them earlier?
- How do church members feel about the original process? What feedback can be gained from a review of this evaluation of the original decisions?

I had considered creating a checklist that churches could reproduce but decided against that in favor of encouraging the “What if” conversations. Church congregations are different—even within a specific denomination—and those differences must be considered when facing this issue.

Additionally, each time a “What if” conversation is held, there will be improvement in the plan the church establishes and perhaps less a feeling of being overwhelmed when faced with an actual situation of reported abuse.

Victims

I believe that there are two extremes that occur for children who have been sexually abused and neither is healthy. The first happens when church members attach the label “Victim” to the child in the manner in which they interact on an ongoing basis with that child. Special treatment (especially when those actions clearly set the child apart from other children) can create as many problems as it hopes to solve.

While I acknowledge that some children are fragile following the storm of attention they endured, healing comes more slowly for a child who is often reminded that he or she *is* fragile. Sexual abuse is *never* the fault of any child, yet one of the side effects of molestation is that victims tend to isolate or draw within themselves. Healing is best found being among healthy people; but that interaction should be encouraged and not demanded.

Along the same lines, a high saturation of treatment can promote a damaged image to a child forced to go for treatment often and over a long period of time. “When will this ever end?” is a common feeling victims sometimes experience.

At the other extreme would be the complete lack of *any* treatment or concern for what the child has gone through. Some parents feel shamed by the attention given their child and might feel that the sooner they can put this behind them the better things will be. Additionally, adults forget that children do not process things in the same manner as they do.

I would suggest that the middle or most effective ground in dealing with victims allows for effective treatment, inclusion in positive activity, and an openness of communication to remind the child that he or she can reach out whenever there is a need to do so. When communication is open and loving, the child will know that healing is a process and his or her journey will have both good *and* bad times.

When a child needs or wants protection as well as nurturing support, it should be available for the asking. At the same time, most good parents know that children need to grow independently. There might be an occasional look of “Am I doing okay?” from them as they take tentative steps toward independence, but in a healthy environment, one step *will* follow another.

Everyone has the right to a definition for healing that works on a personal basis. Over the years I have had to think through what that word might mean for me and for my own walk. So I offer it to you with the hope that it will serve you as it has served me.

Healing is not about forgetting the abuse—it’s about moving beyond it and not allowing the abuse to choke out the potential for growth.

Notes:

CONSEQUENCES AND CONFINEMENT

CHAPTER FIVE

The Offender

Because most situations of reported abuse result in court ordered confinement and not in probation, my comments will be more appropriate for those situations and not well tailored to those whose punishment takes a different form. At the same time, a man on probation within his own community will often experience isolation so profound as to be comparable to a prison setting.

Every now and then I read something in the paper about this or that prison being little more than a country club for felons. Free food, clothing, shelter, and other amenities such as TV give the impression that prison is not punishment. I'm sure such places exist but the majority of prisons in our country would not fit *anyone's* idea of a country club.

Over the years I have been blessed to meet individuals who volunteer to serve as facilitators of Bible studies, share one-on-one in pen pal programs, and help provide practical assistance for the families of offenders through organizations such as Prison Fellowship. What those kinds of organizations offer inmates in prison is a sense of dignity and hope, two commodities in short supply within most prisons.

Those male and female inmates who actively participate in the type of programs I have just mentioned have for the most part bottomed out, looked up, and have seen God's outstretched hand waiting for them to take hold.

Years ago I spoke with a nun who served as a Bible study volunteer. She made the following comment: "Of all those who come to Bible study, the ones most serious about their commitment to change and accepting God are drug addicts, alcoholics, and sex offenders. They've hit bottoms so deep and dark that they know without a doubt that only God can reach them." I've never forgotten those words and have no reason to doubt them. They certainly fit me at that time.

"I was ill and you comforted me, in prison and you came to visit me." (Mt. 25.35) To the majority, this admonition to visit someone in prison is directed toward those with time enough to do so or to family members who want to support change and restoration for someone they love.

I very much wonder if the natural desire in some people for retribution doesn't justify their decision to see prison visits as the Scriptural responsibility of others instead of being a personal mandate. In some states, it could be argued that getting on an inmate's visiting list is a bit of a nuisance, but this inconvenience should not preclude trying to do so.

I've heard the justification, "He got what was coming to him. Maybe loneliness will make him think twice before abusing another child." Others might express themselves more simply, "I hope he rots in prison. Prison is too good for him." For too many people, prison is a place for prisoners and their families.

Letters

For any inmate, a real blessing is to receive a letter from someone in his church family or prayer group. There are no forms to fill out to mail a letter to someone in prison. I liken letters to mini-visits without actual physical presence.

If your church has been doing “What if” conversations, a letter that describes how the process has been evolving will be very helpful to someone in prison for sexual molestation. [Note: This process would be helpful for communication with anyone in prison who hopes to return to the church body.]

One thing stood out for me quite clearly from the very beginning of my own time of confinement—my return would not be easy for many of the church members. As much as I wanted others to see I had repented and was seeking change, I knew that for some I would be far from welcome. Still, I believe that the church owes it to one of their flock to communicate because those who find themselves in prison are indeed like the sheep that was lost.

The Family of an Offender

The arrest of a parent for sexual molestation can cut a devastating path through any family. Whether or not the couple has decided to stay together, the wife of an offender is struggling to keep things together.

During the time of a man’s confinement, the church members might consider asking his wife what they can do to make life easier for her and her family. That could mean letting her know that she is prayed for and cared about. Just hearing that her needs as a person are legitimate and important to others can restore a woman’s faith in the church community.

Sometimes support might mean caring for little ones in order to allow a wife to visit her husband. Sometimes it might mean including the children of an offender in a special outing. The children have value and should not be ignored—but they often are.

Notes:

WHAT NEXT?

CHAPTER SIX

Whether a sex offender is returning to society following a time in prison or his charges did not result in a prison sentence, there is more at stake than merely acknowledging an offender's physical presence.

I have no doubt that when I said, "I'm truly sorry" that my words came from deep in my heart. A church that accepts an apology as the only thing necessary to demonstrate heartfelt repentance needs to be mindful that reconciliation is a process and not merely a single spoken sentence.

The Methodist Church of England report went so far as to suggest that basing reconciliation on little more than an apology would be unworthy and unfair to the offender's victim(s). Any lack of process for reconciliation would be dangerous for the congregation's little ones and harmful to the offender. The report stated that the church should be offering strong hope through the practice of good discipline.

It would be easy to read discipline as *punishment* and if that is the case one should not be surprised if an offender balks at any suggestion of discipline. But the word also means instruction and training. In this light discipline can be seen as a favorable, even helpful, effort on the part of a congregation in leading an offender to new ways of living and better choices.

For reconciliation with the church to be effective and long term, everyone must understand the meaning of the words used in the process. A small group of people from the church willing to help should meet with the offender, spending time discussing both what is expected as well as what is meant by the words used to describe those expectations.

Some of what follows is taken from "The Church and Sex Offenders," written by the Methodist Church of England and referred to in the Introduction. Rather than repeat the title with every reference, I will simply refer to the document as the "report."

Discipline

Those who worked to design the report struggled with the question of discipline. What would that look like in the finished document that would be used by the church as a guideline? They decided that discipline of an offender should include the following as criteria:

- Meet with a small group of Christians regularly
- Regular worship and a nourishing spiritual life
- A pledge to keep clear of temptation situations
- A readiness to share deeply of oneself, to acknowledge one's past misuse of power over others as well as any attempts to hide from reality and minimize sins
- A constantly renewed desire to learn the ways of love

My first impression of this list was very positive. Then it struck me that this list could be offered to *any* group of Christians wanting to experience a deeper spiritual life within a faith community.

In some ways, however, because the list was designed to cover the issue of a sex offender being in membership with a particular church, there is a righteousness that appeals to me. It is a righteousness that defines all sin (1) as significant, (2) as damaging to the Body of Christ, and (3) as potentially fatal to the spirit of the Christian soul. Viewed in the context of seeking Christian discipline for the sex offender, the list is good.

Notes:

IS THERE A WOLF?

CHAPTER SEVEN

The first responsibility of any church is the protection of its young. Many believe that having a convicted sex offender in the church is like placing a wolf in a chicken coop. And with some justification, the congregation might add, “Yes, and it will only be a matter of time before the wolf does ‘what comes naturally’ for the wolf.”

The analogy of a wolf in the chicken coop is a good one except that it does not take into account an important difference--the inability of a wolf to change versus the human potential for change. Knowing, however, how most people might feel about my potential to become the wolf, I would proclaim to parents that not only should all parents and adults be watching the children when I am in the same building, but that parents and adults have a *mandate* to do so. This mandate is not dependent upon my presence but on healthy parenting principles and/or adult responsibility toward children.

Most offenders released from prison and returning to a community find it very difficult to obtain housing or employment. The view in most communities is that an offender should be denied such things—at least not in *their* neighborhood. The rejection is justified in the name of safeguarding neighborhoods and the children of the community that live in those neighborhoods.

The report recommended, however, that church members view an offender from a Christian perspective built on the need for reconciliation and reconnection to take place within the church community. What makes this very difficult is that the people are members of both the community and the church.

A Christian Concern

If the church cares about the soul of an offender, it will do what it can to help protect that individual from unnecessary temptation. It will reach out in Christian love and support—not from a vengeful or punitive posture. In this respect, then, the church *is* being the agent of healing it is meant to be.

As an offender, I need to remember that there are expectations of me established by the church I attend. Some offenders react as if the church has an obligation to forget the abuse; they even expect the church to open doors of participation at *any* level within the church. Let me share two examples.

Example One

Phil confessed his sin of molestation to his pastor when he came home from prison. The pastor prayed with him and reminded him that he was a new creation in the Lord. A short time later, the pastor asked Phil to teach a Sunday Bible class to a group of 8th grade boys and girls. Phil protested that this was the age level of children he had abused in the past, but his protests were met with a reminder that those sins would be forever buried. Seeing no other way out, Phil left the church rather than risk another victim.

Example Two

Pastor Steve called me to discuss a situation he recently had with Ken, an offender who returned to his church after spending several years in prison for molesting young girls. Ken had met with a committee from the church to discuss what was expected of him and agreed to the conditions they placed on his membership there. One of those conditions was that Ken would receive treatment.

Some months later Pastor Steve heard that Ken had completed the secular treatment required of him as part of his parole from prison. When the committee asked if Ken was planning to arrange any follow-up support, Ken shared with them that he felt he was doing just fine on his own and didn't need it.

After discussing the situation with Pastor Steve, the committee again met with Ken and expressed their concerns. Ken's response was to remind them that God had done a significant healing in his heart. He felt he was a changed man, one who no longer needed accountability or even an occasional checkup with a therapist. In his opinion, the committee's concerns were therefore without merit.

The committee reminded him of the agreement he had made in order to be given membership with the church. They expressed their concerns for Ken's well being, the potential for a fall if he insisted on going it alone, and asked him to reconsider his decision. Ken got up and left the meeting.

Feeling that the initial agreement for membership had been broken, the committee recommended that Ken be asked to leave the church.

Somewhere In-Between

Sometimes feelings run so emotionally high about the presence of an offender in the church that there is little if any difference between church response and the kind of negative societal response one reads about in the paper. In such situations pastors are left searching for ways to minister to the offender.

After several interviews with Grant in the local halfway house, Pastor Smith was convinced that there was true repentance and conversion evident in Grant. The man had been a long-time member of his church before being arrested for molesting a neighborhood girl and serving time in prison.

When the pastor raised the issue of Grant attending services at the church with church members, response was exceptionally negative and several threats of "If he's here, we're gone!" were heard. Pastor Smith felt torn between his allegiance to his ever-growing congregation and his sense of responsibility to this single individual wishing a faith community in which to grow.

As of this writing, Pastor Smith had found a small group of men willing to meet one evening a week to do a Bible study with Grant. Given time, Pastor Smith hopes that Grant will be allowed to attend services on Sunday on a probationary level. He does not feel that the solution is ideal, but the decision at least allows for the possibility of reinstatement.

The Small Group

The report suggested the formation of a small group within the church. This group would include the pastor, an individual with therapeutic expertise, at least two individuals willing to serve as monitors, and one member representing the wider church community. It was also recommended that this group meet with the offender's probation officer and the offender to establish boundaries. This group would then operate alongside secular agencies in an attempt to help with the rehabilitation process.

Having such a connection between church and legal authorities can only be a positive thing. I would question, however, how successful the church will be in this effort given the already heavy workload most probation officers in this country face. There might even be opponents of this kind of collaboration based on the much-misunderstood principle of separation of church and state.

I am not saying to scratch the idea—just be willing to face either non-interest or out and out rejection of the idea. From my point of view, such collaboration would ultimately be of value to all involved.

Notes:

IT'S IN THE CONTRACT

CHAPTER EIGHT

Given the number of lawsuits filed each day in this country, it seems logical for churches to consider some type of contract of behavior between an offender and the church. My guess is, however, that such a contract would not protect the church should the individual molest another child. While it is doubtful that the church would be found 100% negligent in its responsibilities, the court might assign some guilt to the church if for no other reason than the church had assumed a legal relationship with the individual because of the contract everyone signed.

[The church might, however, consider the contract as simply a means to justify or validate any decision to ask the individual to give up his church membership and leave the church. From this perspective, a record of agreement on both sides is established for the protection of both parties.]

The report went into specific detail as to what an offender could or could not do, where he could or could not go on church property, and the manner of monitoring that he could expect to see whenever he came to church.

The rationale in the report is pretty straightforward; the committee had considered every physical aspect of the church building in terms of how to best protect the children who attended. They then assigned boundaries (physical and relational) that could not be crossed and made those perfectly clear to the offender. All these became part of the contract—each item initialed as a sign of agreement.

It might be helpful here if I would share some of the contract elements found in the report with you. Because of my background as an offender, I would like to comment on them from what I think might be a different and I hope positive viewpoint. [The contract item will be in italics; my response will follow.]

1. I will never allow myself to be in a situation where I am alone with children/young people.

I agree with this insofar as when I find myself in such a situation I know enough to leave that area. The intent with this point is to prevent occasions such as I fostered in the past where I *did* seek to isolate my victims.

2. I will attend meetings/house groups as directed by the small group.

These meetings could be a wonderful time of praying for and with an offender; hearing and sharing concerns; and revising requirements as needed.

3. I will sit where directed in the church and will not place myself in the vicinity of children and young people.

Over the years I have attended many different churches in my capacity as a speaker and I usually try to determine a safe place to sit. I can honestly say that there have not been many churches where an isolated spot existed free of children and/or young people.

It isn't a matter of contact that should be of concern because it is highly unlikely that anything would happen during a service. But it can be a matter of finding myself noticing someone, and this individual could be in the next pew or on the other side of the aisle.

Rather than physical contact, mental contact is sometimes made. In other words, an offender's mind might be taking a mental video of a child, and that video would become the foundation of

fantasy that could easily lead to acting out. If the pastor or the small group has managed to create an atmosphere of trust that is accepted by the offender, disclosure of the mental contact could be made, prayed over, and discussed. The goal is learning appropriate methods of dealing with such situations, not merely condemning them or using them as proof that the offender will never change.

4. I will not enter certain parts of the building designated by the small group, nor any area where children's activities are in progress.

This is common sense and should not be an issue for any offender. The presumption is made, though, that churches have clearly defined and separate parts of the building where children are apt to meet. In a small church, the physical boundaries might often blur, especially during occasions where adults and children intermix for one reason or another.

Common sense should be the measuring stick. Proximity to children often occurs as a natural extension of the service. On occasions where I have found myself in this situation, I merely gravitate toward an adult I know and one who knows me. The move is understood for exactly what it is.

Note: For offenders such as myself, bathroom use can be a sensitive and difficult issue because of the potential for inappropriate behavior. I personally say a quick prayer before entering *any* restroom and often remind myself that I need God's grace.

While not specifically mentioned in the contract I have included, this issue *is* important and should be discussed. Some churches have general use restrooms (multiple stalls, etc) as well as a single toilet bathroom. If the latter is available, consider it to be the facility the offender should use.

If only larger restrooms are available, the offender and church might wish to consider some type of notification system wherein those visually monitoring an offender could be told of his need to use the restroom. Whether or not the offender is accompanied might depend upon a mutual agreement. To minimize the potential for problems, however, taking care of bathroom needs *before* coming to church is a good idea.

5. I will decline invitations of hospitality where there are children in the home.

I confess that I have been guilty of attending dinner at the home of people with children. I will also acknowledge that I do not feel comfortable with invitations from people who do not know of my background and generally decline those invitations. The invitations I have accepted, however, have been in the company of my wife to homes where my past is known, children are closely monitored, and my own movements restricted by the presence of one or both parents.

6. I accept that two people will sit with me during church activities, accompanying me when I need to use other facilities. They will know of my background (as a sexual offender).

Of all the conditions raised in this contract, this is the one that I feel goes a little too far. The idea is appropriate—make sure that an offender has no opportunity to stray from assigned places into areas or situations where abuse might occur. It's the method that bothers me.

Could the purpose implied be equally served by having these two people agree to keep the offender in visual contact? Why is it presumed that an offender will be attending alone or without family? Does the church monitor any other sin in this fashion? There is a difference, I feel, between monitoring and *highlighting* an offender.

The report clearly acknowledges that there can be change—especially when rooted in a life of honest repentance. The side-by-side monitoring policy does little more than emphasize that some

sins are worse than others. When a church is actively involved in the life of a repentant offender, the congregation will know that and those with children will be protective of their offspring.

As I have stated earlier, I sincerely hope when I walk into my church that parents will take note of my presence. It is for my protection as much as it is for the protection of their children that they do so. Perhaps you can sense the struggle I have in finding the right words to explain how I feel, but I can tell you that I will not be unlike other offenders in similar circumstances.

Maybe this would be a good place to also reinforce the idea that the report is designed to meet the needs of offenders seeking participation and membership in a particular church. What of the individual who has been released from prison, moves to a new city, and attends a church without notifying the pastor of his background?

In reality, there is no way any pastor or church would be able to recognize an offender (recently released *or* never caught) in their midst. For this reason, parental vigilance of the children in the church cannot be overemphasized. The best defense, as they say, is a good offense, and in child protection a good offense consists of observant and caring adults.

7. I accept that someone will provide me with pastoral care.

An offender who wants to be part of a church community after confinement in prison is a person who has come to learn the importance of faith, spiritual renewal, and being nourished by God's people. To be guaranteed time with someone to meet these needs is a wonderful gift more than a requirement.

In prison, most offenders who want pastoral counseling or spiritual guidance submit a request form to see the chaplain and then wait for an appointment time. When there is one chaplain serving 500-1000 or more inmates, this can be a long wait.

8. I understand that there are certain people who will need to be told of my circumstances in order for them to protect the young children/young people for whom they care.

Notification with this aim is positive notification and should not be an issue for any offender. My experience in some churches has been that this information is given only to a select few rather than those congregation members with children. There is a real fear that a general announcement would almost guarantee an exodus from the church as protest to the presence of an offender.

I cannot completely disagree with this kind of thinking but on an ideal plane I would. I have maintained on many occasions that too many sermons focus on one aspect of God's love—usually the fuzzy kind of love that is supposed to make us all feel good. Not much teaching is done on how to work *through* serious sin. All of us can forgive a host of small sins because we all commit them. But the *big* sins are a different matter. Rather than teach forgiveness (not ignorance but forgiveness) of serious sin and the process of healing and repentance needed, some churches excommunicate the sinner.

When I came home from prison, it was suggested that I look for a new church to attend where I might have a fresh start. My wife and I chose to stay with the church we had always attended. This was not (and sometimes still is not) easy for them *or* for us. Over the years, though, there have been times of reconciliation that might not have happened had we moved somewhere else.

It is not the offender's responsibility to change the hearts of others. His is to be obedient to God's word, the authority of the church, and those civil authorities who might still be overseeing his

movements. The church must deal with the manner in which it will handle the issue of an offender's presence. Forgiveness is an oft-heard word. It's easy to say but often very difficult to practice.

9. 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.

While this is a very positive requirement and one which could provide a great deal of help to any offender trying to re-enter society, it is a requirement that would be dependent upon the time availability of the probation officer and the ability of the small group to make a similar commitment of time.

In the earlier section on Small Groups, I shared comments that connecting with civil authorities/probation officers could be a very positive thing. The problem of time availability for an overworked probation officer, however, might still be a major block to the plan.

When I was meeting with my probation officers, I was always asked how things were going at work, at home, and in church. Each of them mentioned that there was some concern about my position as a Chancel Choir director and the position of authority that offered me. Invariably I was asked whether or not the contact numbers I supplied were accurate should they want to speak with the pastor. At the time, I took their concern to mean that they would plan to follow through with a call or visit.

Because the pastors never mentioned any calls or visits over the years, I called the current pastor and asked if my parole agents had ever contacted him. He told me that he had not been called or visited. I doubt that there was a lack of concern involved, just a lack of time.

It has always been important to me, however, to avoid doing or not doing something simply because an agent or some other person in authority might check up on me. As I saw things, my responsibility was to make correct choices, establish and follow healthy boundaries, and be accountable to others. If the agents had checked with the church on how I was doing, the report given them would have been an honest and consistent one.

Again, if this requirement is workable in your area and collaboration can be established among the groups involved, by all means follow through. As an offender, I have chosen to look at supervision as a means of assisting me toward healing and change, not as punitive restriction. I have taken an idealistic position and viewed others as being in my corner, not as being vultures waiting to catch me in a parole violation.

While an offender might not have all of the rights and freedoms afforded to others, care should be taken to respect those rights still in place. If you ask, he will show you a list provided him by his parole agent listing any restrictions or he'll explain what is required of him as a registered sex offender. For its part, the church should offer the respect due a man trying to put things right.

10. 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 (i.e. probation and social services) and any other relevant organization, and the church congregation.

11. I understand that any other concerns will be taken seriously and reported.

These two requirements should make clear to the offender that this process is both important to his well being as well as a matter not to be taken lightly. Prison is a serious consequence to the crime of child molestation. An equally serious consequence for an offender is that trust and confidence in him must be rebuilt one day at a time. As much as I would like people to trust me completely, I recognize that a healthy skepticism can be a protection for all involved.

12. I understand that this contract will be reviewed regularly every ____ months and will remain for an indefinite period.

All those involved in the application of this contract (offender, small group, pastor, and civil authorities) have a vested interest in seeing that there will be no future victims. Each individual will also be bringing a personal perspective and commitment to the contract that might affect the success of the contract.

Years ago I read the adage, “Things change—people change” in a book. That is reality. If the contract is set in concrete with no allowance for occasional shifts on either side, its very rigidity will eventually result in failure. And if failure results, everyone loses.

Notes:

WHAT ELSE?

CHAPTER NINE

It might be obvious from my comments on each of the points included in the contract example taken from the report that I do support the contract concept. I have learned from personal experience that an understanding within one group of people in one time frame can be significantly different when the make-up of the group changes (as it will with time).

Because this contract is for an indefinite time, the only constants are the offender and the central focus of the church—a safe sanctuary for its children and young people. The small group membership may change and the pastor might be transferred but the issue before the church remains the same.

The contract concept is a step toward putting flesh to the Word of God. *All this is from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to Himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And He has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making His appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. (2 Cor.5.18-20)*

We *do* count the sins of men against them in so far as we remember those sins, but we are also called to move beyond the memory in order to encourage all sinners to a more loving, obedient relationship with God. For my part, I cannot see how such a relationship can happen without facing the consequences of my sins, but I face them as best as I can believing in the presence and love of God.

Notes:

SOME RANDOM THOUGHTS

CHAPTER TEN

Treatment Programs

I didn't write a great deal about the role of secular treatment for the sex offender because in most cases required treatment programs for offenders are not connected with the church. There was value in much of what I learned in my own treatment, but there are certainly things that as a Christian I would question.

One of the more obvious issues to me is the manner in which an offender's spiritual life must be set aside in some states because it is seen as being in contradiction to state-run sex offender treatment. A man who advertises that God is part of his treatment is a man who is seen by treatment directors as being in denial and incapable of empathy for his victims. I maintain that when true repentance is present, a man becomes *more* accountable and *more* empathic to his victims.

If the goal of treatment is *solely* to create safeguards against recidivism by an offender, the goal is noble but not noble enough. Such a plan is short-term at best and seriously flawed because it does not take into account the change possible for any offender who desires a new person within.

Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. (1Cor.13.12) An offender who seeks to understand only what he has done while failing to look for what he can become misses the reality of God's loving design.

Change and Healing

The church is meant to be the heart of God among God's people—an agent of forgiveness as well as for conversion. As an offender, one of the truly miraculous things for me is to recall the kinds of choices I once made almost in an automatic fashion and compare them with the choices I now make.

Every offender (myself included) has a responsibility to show evidence of repentance for the grievous harm done to innocent children. I will confess that I am sometimes confused because people tend to measure repentance differently. Some want to bestow full rights in the church to an offender based on little more than an apology offered by the offender.

Others maintain a checklist of things they feel an offender should be doing. The list is never completely checked off; new items are added almost daily—items of responsibility that are required for offenders but not for anyone else. Still others measure healing by time and offer statements such as, "I'll be able to tell when I see true repentance in him." Would this same person be able to recognize his or her own true repentance?

At some point, the church must decide whether or not an offender has, in fact, learned to make healthy choices. Through the efforts of everyone involved, the church should be able to see the hand of God at work and the formation of a powerful witness in what God can do.

In some ways, I would like to think that this transformational process should be an exciting event for the church body. It would sadden me if the process of reconciliation between the church and an offender were little more than a punitive measure or a process of fearful self-defense in the name of the church's children and young adults. The process is one of healing, reconciliation, and above all, hope.

Notes:

WHAT ABOUT MINISTRY?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Ministry

Given all that is going on in the country today, I cannot bring this booklet to a close without discussing the issue of sex offenders and ministry.

Forced by the ongoing public disclosure of priests who have molested children or who have been accused of doing so, Catholic Bishops in America met in Dallas to decide policy related to these men and any others like them whose names might be forthcoming.

Their final decision took on a “One strike, you’re out!” quality but stopped short of deciding how to handle charges that were decades old. As with any decision those in authority might make, some people thought the decision was too strict and others thought it was not strict enough.

I won’t pretend to have some hidden insight as to what churches should or shouldn’t do. All I have to offer you is what is in my heart, and my heart says that Jesus would never have forgiven and healed so many if the lives of those He touched were to be restricted in such a way as to make them invisible. The New Testament is filled with stories of joyous recipients of His healing touch. Before they met Jesus, they were hopeless and in pain or despair. Having met Him, they were hope-filled and alive to the world in which they lived.

I want to assure you that I am not suggesting that an offender called to witness or minister should be allowed free access to children. I fail to see, however, how a monitored ministry to those in hospitals, to those dying, to those in prison, and to those having no one else would jeopardize children. My point is moot, though, if the goal of society (and the church) is to restrict an offender’s movement to where not even accidental contact with children can occur. Only confinement for life will achieve that goal.

There will, I am confident, be legions lined up to tell me how wrong I am or how dangerous my thinking is. They will remind me, “Once a molester, always a molester.” Others will point out that allowing an offender to minister to anyone would somehow be an affront to victims. And still others would say that I fail to take into account the serious nature of sexual molestation.

An offender who has embarked on the road of reconciliation will never forget the harm he has brought into the lives of others. In some ways, one who has surrendered to God and is willing to be accountable in all things has chosen the narrow gate (Matt.7.13). When I think of offenders who are reaching beyond themselves in order to give witness to God’s love, I can’t help but think that there is great rejoicing in heaven for the ones who were lost and are now found.

I would never suggest a blanket policy with respect to offenders being allowed to minister within the church. Each offender is different; each church is different. My heart says, however, “Seek God through prayer and fasting.” And never be surprised at the answers you receive. I know that I’m not.

Notes:

RESOURCES

Booklets written by Bob Van Domelen:

Darkness Now Light, Regeneration Books

Prison and Homosexuality, Exodus International

Help for Adults Attracted to Children, Exodus International

Regeneration Books
PO Box 9830
Baltimore, MD 21284

Exodus International
PO Box 540119
Orlando, FL 32854

Newsletters written by Bob Van Domelen

Into the Light (issues dealing with child molestation)

Wellspring (focus on homosexuality)

Both newsletters are available by writing

Broken Yoke Ministries

PO Box 361

Waukesha, WI 53197-0361

or calling (262) 896-0841

Websites

<http://www.jefnet.com/brokenyoke> (Broken Yoke Ministries)

http://members.tripod.com/~Parents_United/
(a support system for parents)

<http://www.csbsju.edu/isti/> (Interfaith Sexual Trauma Institute)

(links to support for victims and offenders)

<http://www.exodusnorthamerica.org> (Exodus International)

(Excellent website with resources on many topics)

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