Special Issues In The Intervention and Treatment of Sexual Offenders Affiliated With Christian Churches and Religious Organizations¹

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One would like to think that sexual abuse does not occur in churches or religious organizations. Christian scriptures & theology consistently highlight the responsibility for Christians to protect and care for the powerless and vulnerable in their populations. Further, a variety of sexual deviations are negatively sanctioned and are clearly contrary to historical Biblical sexual ethics. Research in North America however suggests that incidence and prevalence rates for victims and perpetrators in religious communities is generally commensurate with that of the general population.

There are three response priorities in cases of sexual abuse. Firstly, the identified victim(s) should be protected. This also means that potential victims should not be accessible to the perpetrator. Secondly, the perpetrator must be stopped. Research continues to demonstrate that only rarely will a perpetrator stop sexually abusing and maintain a low risk for relapse without professional intervention. Finally, a goal for perpetrators and victims is healing, change, and restoration of all parties to the extent that this is possible.

Sexual offenders who are part of Christian churches or religious organizations often misuse their position or belief system toward the maintenance of sexual deviancy. Therefore, consistent with the priorities described above, the following guidelines are suggested for both non-religious professionals as well as religious leaders toward understanding some pitfalls and possibilities for effective intervention and treatment:³

1. Follow official policies, procedures, and statutory requirements.

Hopefully the church or Christian organization has developed policies or procedures reflecting legal and ethical parameters for handling cases of sexual abuse. If such policies or procedures exist, then it is important to follow the steps outlined therein.

2. Expect that shock and denial will often be the responses by leadership or membership to victim allegations or disclosures.

One may be surprised or shocked by an allegation, but should nonetheless avoid a stand of absolute disbelief. Yes, "it can happen here". Yes, "even he (or she) could do such a thing." Be prepared for the denial, minimizations, lies, etc. that one hears when confronting an offender. Remember that there are seldom false allegations, but the possibility still exists. Don't make any special "deals" with the accused.

Don't minimize what the sexual offender has done; e.g. "He only touched her breasts." This can be a gross underestimation of the devastating impact that such an action can have on

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the victim, and may not reflect the actual seriousness of a given perpetrator’s deviant patterns of behavior.

At the same time, don't condemn or reject the repentant offender. The crisis of disclosure, or the pressures of accountable and responsible behavior before or during investigation, treatment, etc. usually feel overwhelming. The offender needs your informed support--support to do what is righteous, just, and restorative!

3. **Responsibility and accountability are key concepts in working with the perpetrator.**

   The **primary** role of clergy and other leadership is to hold the sexual offender **responsible and accountable** for his or her behavior. The perpetrator may not be fully responsible for the development of his deviance, but is responsible for changing his hurtful behavior. Accountability is important not just for the cessation of offense behaviors, but also for the ongoing maintenance of a harm reducing lifestyle.

4. **Mercy may lead to repentance.**

   Christian concepts of righteousness, mercy, grace, and justice are compatible with an intolerance of sexual abuse. The initial form of these concepts should at least include the co-existent necessity for repentance and confession. Confessing and repenting of abusive behavior means to turn from the wrong and instead do what is right.

   The concrete demonstration of repentance in the sexual offender is demonstrated when most (if not all) of the following are evident:

   - He substantively admits to at least the offense he is charged/accused of (when the preponderance of the evidence supports the allegation).
   - He agrees to submit to the authority of church leadership.
   - He demonstrates a concrete willingness to seek out and begin a sexual deviancy evaluation and treatment program and complete a sexual offender evaluation from a recognized treatment specialist. Better decisions can be made by all parties when good information is available.
   - He officially allows for a free exchange of information between the clergyman or other leadership and authorities involved in the investigation, prosecution, or assessment/treatment. If there is indeed "no problem", there should also be no problem for the offender to sign a release of information.
   - Lies, distortions, and secrecy are among the perpetrators’ greatest weapons; they are afraid of the truth being known. Therefore, seek to bring to light the truth--as much as that is possible to ascertain!
   - He declines to take a victim to court to "prove his innocence" (in the absence of **absolutely clear** evidence of false accusation).
   - He begins to make restitution. An example of this is demonstrating financial responsibility toward the victim and family(s) with regard to medical care, therapy, etc.
• He remains completely separate from any potential victims (in cases of incest, this usually means leaving the home until an appropriate time for return, if possible, is determined.

Confession, prayers, and the offering of forgiveness to the remorseful offender who promises that he'll "never do it again" is a good starting place. However, these should never be a substitute for further counseling and other services. **There must be outside intervention and long-term therapy** if there is going to be any substantial and/or lasting change in the behavior and lifestyle of the sexual offender.

5. **Maintain neutrality and be cautious about "taking sides."**

Any allegation should be investigated carefully and objectively. The attitude should be that there is as much chance that it could have happened as it might not have happened. If there is a question of which "side" to take, or what option will constitute the best decision with regard to intervention in cases of sexual abuse and assault, it is best to **err on the side of the victim** and/or families involved.

6. **The role of legal counsel may be limited.**

Acknowledge and support the need for legal counsel if the court is involved, but do not support "not guilty" pleas from the sexual offender. Defense counsel often encourage offenders to plead "not guilty" because they feel he can "beat the charge." This is a travesty of justice, is immoral and unrighteous. And in the end, it hurts the offender because he is not forced to get help. This then increases the risk of another offense.

7. **Monitor and support the treatment process.**

• Obtain releases of information.
• Consult with the therapist about relevant therapy or supervisory issues.
• Insure that the offender remains in treatment until discharged by the therapist--not just when probation has ended.
• Assist in finding and educating "supervisors" or "chaperones"--those who can monitor approved visits between the perpetrator and the victim or other vulnerable parties.
• Assure that there is "no contact" with children or other potential victims.
• Assist in monitoring restitution actions as applicable, especially payment of victims' treatment.
• Support the development of a family reintegration plan when appropriate.

8. **Spirituality may still be an important asset to the perpetrator.**

Pastoral leadership should continue to offer spiritual support to the repentant perpetrator through prayer, Bible study, the sacraments, confession, spiritual counsel, and fellowship with other believers. Leadership should work toward creating a church environment where a perpetrator in treatment can experience acceptance and support--not in continuing his deviant behavior--but in working hard at learning how to control himself and rebuild his broken world.

9. **Inform the church congregation as necessary.**

Apprise the religious membership of the issues as appropriate; for example: actions of the leadership, church discipline process (disfellowshipping/ excommunication), safety of children, etc. A case of child sexual abuse in the church usually has many repercussions within
the congregation. In order to avoid misunderstandings or "taking sides" in a destructive way, church leadership should be proactive in disseminating appropriate information.

10. **Maintain support for the primary victim(s).**

   Don't forget the victim; and certainly don't blame her or him for what has happened! Seek to protect his or her right to confidentiality so that the church or organization remains a relatively safe place to be.

11. **Maintain support for the secondary, non-offending family members also.**

   The perpetrator's family's needs should be considered. The non-offending partner is often the most judged and isolated person in the family, and she may be without a source of income.

12. **Reintegrating the Offender Into the Family**

   An incest offender is usually asked to leave the home following disclosure and during the greater part of treatment. The following points should be remembered when consideration is given to his return to the family:

   - Therapists are taking significant risks in placing treated child molesters into families with children.
   - The primary goal of family therapy in sexual abuse cases is to protect children in the family and in the community from further abuse.
   - A structured, criteria-based program for reintegrating an offender into a family must be established and adhered to by all treatment team members.
   - Child molesters present a continued risk to children even after treatment; specific internal and external controls must be learned and consistently implemented by all family members to provide continued protection for children.
   - The nonabusing parent's ability to monitor the offender and protect the children is a pivotal factor.

13. **Church congregation may need intervention.**

   It should be remembered that the revelation of sexual abuse among church members can be difficult for a congregation to process. A sexual offense by a church leader is especially traumatic for those who have looked up to him as representative of God.

   Interventions with congregations are often best accomplished by both internal leadership external consultants who are skilled at helping the membership--both young and old--to talk, share their feelings, and learn how to think and respond to the allegations and sexual abuse issues. There is also a need to continue to offer a continuity in normal services and church functions in order to facilitate a relatively safe, predictable community environment.

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