

WELCOMING REGISTERED SEX OFFENDERS?

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Three churches dealt differently with the public information on their state's online sex offender list. Registered offenders were active in all three congregations, but leaders initially didn't know it. In one, the registered offender approached the minister and asked for her assistance in his recovery. Knowing that the counts against him were publicly accessible, he wanted to make sure the whole congregation knew his past, vigilantly supervised him, and supported him in his recovery.

In the second church, the minister had checked every member's zip code through the state's online sex offender registry and discovered no members listed. However, when he ran regular visitors' names, he discovered the best voice in the choir had served time for felony rape. Using that information, the minister met with the visitor, encouraged his continued participation in worship, but insisted that a covenant of boundaries be developed that would safeguard the church's participants and the visitor's own well-being. The man agreed to sign the covenant, which promised he would always be escorted on church grounds and at any church-related events, meet regularly with an accountability group, and would not date or socialize individually with any church members. Layers of clear but compassionate disclosure followed—first to staff, then the governing body, next parents, and finally the whole congregation. And of course, the church reviewed their “safe congregation” policy to make sure that the best safeguards were in place to protect everyone's safety.

The third pastor had refused to check the Megan's Law registry, but a mom in the congregation did, because one of the visitors gave her “the creeps.” Earlier she had complained to the religious education staff about her concerns but was treated as if she were over-reacting. So she turned to the Internet, and sure enough, the man's name was listed. If her earlier complaints seemed like over-reacting, you can just imagine how furious and vocal she became! The man finally left the church during the uproar. His absence might have solved the problem, but now the mom finds it hard to trust anyone in the congregation to take her seriously or to protect her children.

When church leaders leave it up to a member to discover information that is publicly available, upset is bound to occur. The leaders appear irresponsible, naïve, or secretive—rather than effective and trustworthy. So be sure to determine whether anyone in the congregation or community is on the registry and respond appropriately to balance your radical hospitality with protecting the vulnerable in our midst.

Soon to be released by Alban Institute
Healthy Disclosure: Solving Communication Quandaries in Congregations
A book about managing sensitive information in congregations
by Kibbie Ruth and Karen McClintoch

Check out
www.kyros.org
for more resources

SAMPLE COVENANT between a Church and Registered Sex Offender

Almost every Sunday, we commit to the following covenant of faith in our worship together. It shapes our life as a community and the personal commitments we make in faith. As Ralph S. Owens comes into the fellowship we share, he too shares the responsibilities and joy of our covenant life.

A COVENANT OF FAITH

We covenant with God and with each other:
to walk together in all God's ways as the Holy is revealed to us;
to give ourselves freely and without reserve to Jesus' ministry in this church;
to celebrate through worship God's amazing gifts of unity and diversity;
to take up Christ's mission around the world, striving for justice and peace;
to care for the earth and for all her people, reconciling ourselves to them in love;
for God gives immeasurable grace into every human life.

A COVENANT OF FAITH

First Church covenants with Ralph S. Owens to be a community of sisters and brothers, to be a source of support and encouragement, to welcome his gifts of friendship and ministry. The church invites Ralph to participate in worship and adult classes, in fellowship events and mission projects that involve no children. He is also welcome to request and receive pastoral care from the clergy of First Church, including receiving assistance with referrals to professional counselors. Ralph covenants with First Church to love God with all his heart and soul and to care for church members and visitors with respect, dignity and concern. He also understands that information about his conviction will be shared appropriately with all staff, elected leaders, parents and other members of the congregation.

In honoring this covenant, Ralph agrees to:

- Not participate in children's and youth programming or classes, including not entering the Christian Education building while these events are taking place.
- Be accompanied at all times on church property by a member or members of his support group, including visits to the bathroom and in the parking lot.
- Never approach a child or youth for any reason, on or off church property.
- If a child or youth in the congregation approaches him, either at church or in the community, graciously excuse himself from this situation.
- Be in continued prayer and conversation with his support group and the ministers about his participation in church-related activities.

First Church covenants with Ralph to be in prayer and fellowship together as we all seek God's love, God's forgiveness and God's grace in our lives.

Should this covenant be broken in some way or his behavior threatens the safety of any member of this faith community, those who sign below will meet with Ralph to pray and determine a meaningful and appropriate response. This may include the church's request that Ralph no longer participate in church activities.

Signed and dated by the senior pastor, the registered sex offender, and the president of the governing Council

FUTURE WORKSHOPS for Congregational Leaders

THE NEWSLETTER
for congregational
leaders creating safer
faith communities

KYROS

March
2007

Protecting God's Children

April 22, 2007

12:30PM-2:30PM

San Jose

\$15

includes materials and lunch

These workshops meet
continuing education
requirements for
UCC, Episcopal, and
Presbyterian clergy

Over The Line: Maintaining Pastoral Boundaries

May 17, 2007

10:00 AM- 4:00 PM

Asilomar

\$45

includes materials and lunch

For more information,
e-mail info@kyros.org or call **(650) 343-3377**

RADICAL HOSPITALITY: Do We Welcome a Sex Offender?

Scripture calls us to welcome the stranger and any other repenting individuals into our worshipping community. But that radical hospitality currently faces emotional resistance in many congregations now that anyone can go online to learn where registered sex offenders of adults or children live almost anywhere in the country. Scripture also calls us to protect the vulnerable. The safety of both children and adults demands much more caution than an unquestioning, open invitation for anyone to participate in a faith community. How can a church balance personal safety issues with open hospitality?

Because congregants expect their leaders to safeguard their well-being at church, leaders have a fiduciary responsibility to check the publicly accessible National Sex Offender Registry (www.nsopr.gov) for the zip codes or names of their church members and visitors. Every state has different criteria for what offenses require registration and whose names appear on the Registry, and the accuracy of the information available on the websites varies. But leaders are negligent if they refuse to screen for potential sex offenders in their midst.

Some clergy argue that they would rather not know about the crimes of any in their congregation. One explained, "My ministry is complicated enough already. What I don't know, I don't need to deal with." Certainly parents could monitor the Megan's Law registry for themselves, however when a parent discovers someone in the congregation on the list, hysteria and anger tend to escalate and clergy in particular are blamed for failure to protect the flock.

What if you recognize a name on the registry as affiliated with your church? How do you handle that information to both reduce the offender's shame and increase members' safety? Since not all sex offenders are at risk of repeating their crimes, not all situations should be handled in the same way. Some offenses listed on the registry were a single incident that occurred many years ago and the offender has worked hard at recovery; some offenses are recent or repeat crimes. So based on the offenses and the individual's efforts to make amends and heal, clergy and lay leaders have a broad range of options for disclosure of information on the registry. However, protecting this public information as if it were confidential or refusing to access it threatens the safety of others.

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If you would like
more information
about
maintaining a
safe congregation,
while welcoming
recovering
offenders, please
contact Kyros at
(650) 343-3377.



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