

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.

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.

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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.

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