

# Learning to deal with sex offenders

## Ministry helps houses of worship perform background checks

By Christine Morente, STAFF WRITER

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SAN MATEO — A short distance from the toddler and infant center at San Mateo's Congregational Church, the Rev. Kibbie Ruth sits alone in her office in the attic of the church's administration office.

Each day, as she has for the past 22 years, Ruth and her staff have worked to educate a community in denial — churchgoers who believe children are protected from sexual predators when they attend a house of worship. Unfortunately, Ruth said, it's the opposite.

"They're more at risk at church than in any other organization," said the San Mateo resident, who also noted that, unlike the Boys and Girls Scouts of America and many other nonprofit organizations, volunteers are not usually screened by churches.

"The faith community is two decades behind. Most congregations don't have child protection policies because (they) believe nothing can happen to their children."

Ruth is the senior consultant for Kyros Ministry, an agency created in 1984 that works with clergy leaders across the country to protect children and adults from abuse within the faith community.

"It's such a messy issue," she said. "But I was concerned about my own girls, and through my work, I had known so many people who are victims and the damage it causes."

The past two decades, sexual abuse allegations in a number of religious denominations have run rampant worldwide, most notably within the Roman Catholic Church. In recent years, there are more accusations going beyond clergy leaders and employees, extending to church volunteers.

The commonality of it has driven Ruth to persuade clergy leaders to become proactive in looking for sexual predators online through the Megan's Law registry, which is compiled by the California Department of Justice. The Megan's Law Web site maps out where sexual predators live, what they're convicted of and their physical characteristics.

"Megan's Law is public information. Figure out how you want to handle this information," she said. "Do you want to wait until someone trips onto a name and is upset because nobody has done anything about it?"

One out of three girls is sexually exploited before they turn 18 years old, Ruth said. The same can also be said for boys, but Ruth said there is no hardcore evidence supporting that statistic.

The reality is, there are 548 registered sex offenders in San Mateo County, according to the Megan's Law Registry.

Ruth said this poses an interesting question for congregations.

"How do you share the spiritual message while at the same time making sure the congregation is safe?" Ruth said. "Most of the faiths have a strong bias to be hospitable and good to people who are struggling."

Since the 1980s, insurance companies, like Iowa-based GuideOne, Insurance have offered to add a sexual-misconduct policy to coverage for congregations nationwide. In 2004, GuideOne revamped its guidelines to add more safeguards to protect youth because of the increasing number of allegations of child abuse.

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"Our main goal is to help children and prevent tragedies in the first place. It (the congregation) can never recover from an allegation," said Eric Spacek, a senior risk manager for GuideOne.

Spacek said currently his company has 200 pending claims of sexual misconduct and sees 15 to 20 new claims a month. Under the firm's guidelines, its congregations are required to do background screening for volunteers and employees and must implement a six-month waiting period before hiring them.

Ruth said Lutheran and Episcopalian congregations are required to have child protection policies in order to get insured, and a number of Catholic dioceses have policies now as well. The latter have also become much better at screening priests, she adds.

First Presbyterian Church in Burlingame has its own protection policy, but so far hasn't reached the point of identifying registered sex offenders, said Linda Galligan, director of Children's Ministries.

"We wouldn't ban them from worship," she said.

At First Presbyterian, employees are fingerprinted and have gone through a background check, but volunteers often refuse to do it. They do, however, receive training, Galligan said. To protect children, adults and teens are never allowed to be alone with a child, and more than one adult works with kids.

"We pretty much know our volunteers very well," Galligan said. "If anybody new comes in, we're pretty careful to make sure they're watched. It's a tricky thing."