

A Delicate Balance

MAKING CHURCHES SAFE AND WELCOMING



Michael Newman/Photo Edit

A man uses a puppy to try to lure a girl into his car.

by PEGGY HALSEY

Two phone calls coming only weeks apart got my attention. It was the late 1990s when I staffed the Office of Ministries with Wo-

Peggy Halsey is a consultant on women and children's issues, including working with FaithTrust Institute, a multi-faith organization working to end sexual and domestic violence. She is retired executive secretary for ministries with women, children and families for the United Methodist General Board of Global Ministries.

men, Children and Families at the United Methodist General Board of Global Ministries. Those of us who worked in the denomination and ecumenically on issues of abuse were just beginning to realize that the United Methodist Church's work on "Safe Sanctuaries" — reducing the risk of child abuse in church programs and facilities — while a first step in keeping children safe, did not adequately deal with an issue some churches face: the presence of registered child sex offenders in congregations.

The first call was from a member of a local-church council. She told me a longtime member of the church was serving a prison term for child molestation. He would be released in less than a year, and planned to return to the community and congregation. Church members were wondering what they needed to do to prepare for his return.

She spoke of deep concern, soul-searching and even some division among church members and leaders who wanted to be sure children were safe at the church and also

wanted to be supportive of the man and his family.

The second call was from a pastor disturbed because members of his congregation were not happy about an outreach effort he had undertaken. Upon learning through a visit from local police that a convicted child sex offender had moved into the neighborhood, he had visited and befriended the man, and invited him to church. The pastor had been unprepared for the fear that surfaced among parents and leaders of children's ministries, particularly when word got around that the man had volunteered to assist with the youth program.

These two situations underline the dilemma churches face when two deeply held values appear to conflict: that of protecting the vulnerable, particularly children, and that of offering the church's hospitality and ministry to all. Both are sacred duties of Christian communities.

The United Methodist General Conference recognized the seriousness of this dilemma when it passed a resolution in 2004 on "Church Participation by a Registered Child Sex Offender." The resolution cites facts that should be taken into consideration by local churches.

Among those facts is that without extensive professional treatment, child sexual offenders will re-offend. While pastoral care in combination with lifelong professional treatment can be crucial in providing support for offenders who are struggling not to re-offend, careful planning, advice from experts in the field and long-term monitoring must accompany welcoming a child sex offender into a congregation.

A registered child sex offender who seeks to be part of a church community should expect to have conditions placed upon his or her participation. Offenders who have

been in treatment and are committed to living lives free of further abuse know that to accomplish that goal, they must structure a life that includes ongoing treatment, accountability mechanisms, and lack of access to or interaction with children.

Being prepared

The most effective and objective way to approach a plan for the participation of a convicted offender returning to or joining the church is to have discussions before the situation arises. Discuss the possibility in the church council and adult-education settings.

The resolution adopted by General Conference – "Church Participation by a Registered Child Sex Offender," No. 355 in the *Book of Resolutions of the United Methodist Church, 2004*, commends action steps to local churches. These include:

Develop a carefully constructed and openly negotiated covenant between the offender and the church community, with agreements in the following areas:

- The convicted offender's participation in a professional counseling program for the entire time of church membership or participation;
- Assignment of adult "covenant partners" to accompany the convicted offender at all times while on church property or attending church activities;
- Identification of areas of church facilities that are off limits to the convicted offender, including children's ministry corridors and rest rooms;
- Restrictions on the convicted offender's leadership in or on behalf of the church; and
- Prohibition of the convicted offender having any role in the church that includes contact

with children or youth.

Assure that the covenant is maintained by having it written and signed by the convicted offender, the pastor(s) and the chair of the church council. Monitoring of the covenant should be undertaken as a serious and permanent responsibility of the church council or one of its committees.

Openness and transparency are important. Secrecy is not in the best interest of the convicted offender or the congregation. Make certain all parties, particularly parents and the convicted offender's parole officer, are aware of the terms of the covenant and willing to assist in monitoring it.

On the right track

Two years after the phone calls described in the opening paragraphs of this article, I received a call that confirmed for me that we were on the right track in recommending the covenant described above. A clergywoman told me a man attended their small congregation for the first time. The following week, he sent her an e-mail saying he liked the church and wanted to be a part of it, but he needed to tell her he was a registered child sex offender.

He went on to say he needed that to be openly known for his protection and that of the church. The terms of his parole required him to have no contact with children, and he needed an agreement with church leaders to assure that condition was met. He asked the pastor to meet with him and his parole officer to talk about what was needed for him to safely be part of the congregation.

These are not easy issues for churches to confront, but the safety of children and youth and the integrity of the church require care and respect for all, including those who are struggling to live lives free of abuse. ■