

Church policies for sex offenders

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On Sundays, Good Samaritan's men head to Christian Heritage Church, a Pentecostal congregation a few doors down from program offices. Lead Christian Heritage pastor Steve Dow, whom Good Samaritan leader Glenn Burns calls an "old cowboy from Oklahoma," was the one who offered Good Samaritan a place to land after the program was booted from Woodville.

A strict set of program rules govern the men's church involvement, says Good Samaritan's Andy Messer. They aren't allowed to be alone in the building. They're restricted to public zones and don't have access to the children's areas. They're never allowed to talk with a child alone. Violations mean expulsion—there's no grace period, Messer says.

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Christian Heritage runs its own security protocols. Those with a sex crime in their past can't serve in leadership, and anyone involved in the children's ministry gets a background check. A plainclothes security team monitors cameras and is posted at the access points to the children's area.

Dow says he's "never had a single issue" with Good Samaritan's men. He's also gotten no complaints from parents. "We don't make a big deal out of it, and people are aware of our security measures," he says. And he's open with his members about the church accepting people with a past: "I make statements from the pulpit that 'if someone with a bad record comes in and we can't accept them and allow them to experience the grace of God, then are we really a church?'"

That isn't the way every congregation responds. Bob and Mary Rumbley founded and manage Care Tallahassee, a Christian residential program for about 25 ex-offenders, most of whom have a sex-crime record. It's served about 700 men over a dozen years. Like Good Samaritan, it's never had one of its men reoffend while in the program, according to Rumbley.

A few years ago, Care Tallahassee was looking for a church willing to let its men attend services. Rumbley approached the minister of the Southern Baptist congregation he attended, Faith Baptist Church. Pastor David Clark agreed—he and his wife had recently returned from years in Mexico as missionaries and believed in “going where the spirit was moving,” says Rumbley. Rumbley told Clark that members would object to letting Care’s men attend and says Clark’s response was, “Jesus didn’t turn people away, and I’m not going to either.” (Through Rumbley, Clark said that he wasn’t available to speak for this story before deadline.)

Rumbley’s prediction came true. Members started leaving: from about 300 on a typical Sunday, they now get about 75, a third of them from Care Tallahassee. But Rumbley says he and Clark think that’s made the church stronger: “We’re focused on the scriptures and on modeling Jesus . . . we’re pleased with the seriousness of the people in the congregation. Pastor Clark and I both feel that it’s not just numbers that show whether a church is successful.”

One national group tries to help churches design rules on inclusiveness and safety. The Connecticut-based Religious Institute advocates for “sexual, gender, and reproductive health, education, and justice in faith communities and society.” It gets at least three or four calls a year from churches concerned with how to include people with a sex-offense past, says institute director Marie Alford-Harkey.

That’s why in 2004 the institute’s co-founder, Unitarian Universalist minister Debra Haffner, interviewed a dozen pastors and wrote an online manual laying out steps for churches in designing a policy on integrating those whose history includes a sexual offense. The manual advises that any policy be part of a larger sexual abuse prevention framework for the church. That fits with what research shows—well north of 90 percent of new sex crimes are committed by someone not on a sex offender registry.

At the heart of a church policy is a suggested “limited-access agreement” that spells out how ex-offenders participate in church life. It welcomes their inclusion in church events involving adults and has them promise not to interact with children on church property or at church events and to always be accompanied when in the presence of children.

One reason for a tight agreement? It protects ex-offenders against false allegations, the manual notes.

Whatever the substance of a policy, Alford-Harkey recommends it be developed through a transparent and inclusive process. Open conversations, she says, help abuse survivors feel safer while telling ex-offenders that there’s a way for them to be honest about their past but still participate.

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