



E-Quipped for Prevention

May 2015
Safe Church Policies

Resources for Learning and Growth

Getting Started on Establishing Safe Church Policies

Written by Gwen Kuhrt, Cherish All Children Board Member

Refuge and strength. Strong Tower. Fortress. Stronghold. Rock. Shield.

These are just a few of the words and phrases the Bible uses to describe our God. These are also words to consider when thinking about how we need to ensure we have church practices in place to keep out danger and harm for all our members, especially the most vulnerable among us - our children. We want and need to do everything possible to make sure our churches are a sanctuary where everyone feels welcomed, loved, and safe.

In a church community, it's easy to believe that we know each other and that abuse prevention and response may not be needed; or perhaps what we have in place now is adequate. Unfortunately, abuse remains an ongoing possibility, and can touch any community at any time.

There is no such thing as a "typical" sex offender. They can be male or female; young or old; married or single; educated or not; and a perpetrator can have strong ties to their families and communities (which includes the church). In addition, not all perpetrators are adults—an estimated 23% of reported cases of child sexual abuse are perpetrated by individuals under the age of 18 according to the Department of Justice.

One of the essentials for Cherish All Children congregations is to create and adopt "safe church" policies to ensure the well-being of children while participating in all congregational activities. This includes activities on-site and off-site sponsored by the congregation. A safe church policy also protects the church staff and volunteers from potentially damaging allegations of abuse and making expectations clear on reporting accountability.

A safe church policy should include the overall philosophy, definitions of abuse, general policies, and specific policies regarding training, discipline, supervision, transportation, screening, reporting, and response.

In developing a Safe Church Policy, a critical question to start with is who should be covered by these policies. Employees of the church typically receive a background check as part of the employment process, and receive special training and education when working with children. It may be more difficult or cost-prohibitive to run a background check for every volunteer that comes in contact with children and youth,

although it is strongly recommended if possible.

If this is not possible, there are still ways to ensure the safety of children and youth in the church's care. Examples include:

- Requiring all volunteers who frequently work with children to complete a volunteer application and provide references from outside the congregation who know the volunteer and how they work with children. Contact the references and ask them questions to help determine if a particular person is appropriate for working with children.
- Making sure that safe church policies are communicated to each volunteer. Volunteers should also be required to sign a document indicating that they have read and understand the policies.
- Establishing clear guidelines as to how many adults should be in the room with children/youth at any one time and restroom procedures.
- Making key policies visible in areas where children or youth meet by hanging posters or other appropriate signage.
- Setting a trial period for volunteers working with children, and during this time, having them closely monitored by a staff person.
- Educating everyone working with children and youth with specific examples of what is appropriate behavior and what is not. This includes the most appropriate ways to demonstrate affection and the importance of understanding and respecting boundaries.

While we cannot prevent all abuse, we can reduce the risk of abuse happening in our churches. Every church should have a safe church policy to protect children, youth, and the most vulnerable among us. The [Cherish All Children website](#) has additional resources to get you started. If you have a Safe Church Policy in place, now may be a good time to review the policy and update as needed.

Working With Convicted Sex Offenders: Where to Start

Written by Erica Larson, from a phone interview with Barbara Keller, consultant to the ELCA for the Prevention of Sexual Misconduct

The call for every congregation is to be a safe place for all people. All forms of sexual misbehavior by clergy, lay leaders, and church members are unacceptable within the life of the church.

Barbara Keller has been the consultant to the ELCA for the Prevention of Sexual Misconduct since 2006 and is a great resource for congregations seeking to improve their policies and work towards creating a safe place where people can worship, learn, work, love, and receive care in a manner that is free from sexual misconduct. Her background also includes supervising a treatment program for sexual violence and domestic violence offenders in suburban Philadelphia.

Much of Barbara's current work deals with members of congregations, and she receives about three calls a week from churches wanting to create policies for

working with sex offenders. Everyone's situation is extremely individual, and congregations want to cover all their bases.

In her experience, the best way to approach working with registered sex offenders is individually, on a case by case basis. Because the natures of the offenses and the conditions each person has within the community are so different, it is not possible for congregations to have a blanket policy for every convicted sex offender who wants to become a part of a faith community.

The process of creating a policy and covenant for a person who is not up front with the leadership of a congregation would be very different from the process of working with an offender who was forthcoming and proactive in seeking to be a part of that faith community. When entering into this conversation, it is best to start with the information given by the sex offender him or herself.

There are several steps that congregations can take before, during, and after working with a convicted sex offender in their community. If a congregation has yet to be approached by a sex offender about joining that community, Barbara does NOT recommend any sort of open forum for intentional discussion within a congregation at large asking the question, "Would we welcome a convicted sex offender into our congregation?" There would likely be an enormous amount of push-back, particularly from those who have been abused, and it actually might cause more difficulty if you have the conversation in the church before the issue even arises. Instead, congregations could have a committee or team of people that researches the issue, and creates a process for what steps the pastor and leadership would take in approaching this discussion and working with an individual.

Then, if a congregation is approached by an individual offender, the pastor, selected leaders, and the offender would work together on a limited access covenant for participation in the church. Some of the steps put in place might include:

- Choosing a leader in the congregation who is the same gender as the offender to have an initial conversation with the pastor and the offender.
- An introduction from the pastor to the executive members of a church council or other selected members of the congregation who would be a part of working with the individual and creating a covenant.
- Seeking out as much information as possible from and about the individual, from which an informed conversation can take place. This must include talking with the probation or parole officer for the offender. Communication needs to take place with their parole officer so that the person does not do things that are against the conditions of their parole, which could result in a parole violation and return to jail. Congregations can also check the sex offenders registry; go to the clerk of courts office in the courthouse where the adjudication took place in order to get public records about everything that happened in the courthouse; consult with Barbara Keller; and, ask permission from the offender to check with their therapist to make sure they are attending regularly and working on the issues they are supposed to work on. Confidential information from therapy sessions would not be shared.
- Working on the limited access covenant, which could include a spiritual or theological statement; accountability statement for a safe church; the name of a non-related, same-gendered mentor who is with the person at all times when

they participate in church activities; and, conditions for their limited participation within the community. A covenant doesn't interfere with forgiveness, grace, or redemption. Those are still things that are possible within our relationship with God and individuals. A covenant is the accountability piece within the congregation, and is an opportunity for the person to think about their ethical and moral responsibility. Contact Barbara at barbara.keller@elca.org to receive her template for a limited access covenant. This is only a starting place, from which faith communities can individualize the covenant on an as needed basis.

- Sending a letter and perhaps having a discussion forum for adult members of the congregation in order to share that you may be welcoming a convicted sex offender into your midst. There is NO confidentiality when working with a convicted sex offender, and the congregation needs to have full disclosure. If members respond negatively, it requires work on the part of the pastor to share the theological reasons why this is important; and, the reminder that there is limited access to the community. It is important to remember that there are ALREADY offenders in our midst that we don't know about. In this case, the individual has been forthcoming, and has worked with congregational leadership in order to safely participate, on a limited basis, in the life of the faith community.
- Planning a review date on a regular basis to check in with the individual and his or her mentor and make any adjustments necessary for continued involvement in the congregation.

A congregation may make the decision that they are not ready to welcome this person into participation in the community. Some conditions are so serious and complicated that entry into the community may not be possible, depending on the conditions of their parole and the particulars of the offense. An extremely violent rapist or an offender with multiple convictions are people who just don't "get it", and cannot be safely welcomed into a church. Those who carry out very compulsive sex offenses such as exhibitionism and voyeurism are also more risky.

Congregations may also decide that participation may need to be postponed until a later date. In this case, if it is safe and appropriate, the pastor may need to visit and minister to this person at home, accompanied by a same-gendered person from the congregation, until the individual is better known. Depending on their situation and needs, individuals could be referred to Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, Sex Addicts Anonymous, or other organizations in the community that offer support to offenders.

It is safer if you have an offender who has other contacts in the congregation, such as supportive individuals or families. If the person is out on their own with no support from family or others in the congregation, there is more risk. So, ultimately, participation in a congregation depends on the nature of the offense, the conditions of the parole, and the attitude of the offender.

Early in the life of the ELCA, this faith body expressed clearly its intention to take whatever measures it could to help prevent sexual abuse and misconduct within the church. Being in conversation and creating safe church policies helps make this possible. For more information from the ELCA on dealing with sexual misconduct in

congregations, go to <http://www.elca.org/Our-Work/Leadership/Vocation-Become-a-Leader/Report-Misconduct>.

One Congregation's Story

Written by Amy Hartman, National Director

Earlier this year, the congregation to which I belong welcomed a man (I will call him Greg - not his real name) with a record of past sexual offending as a new member. This was able to take place through careful planning and thoughtful conversation for over a year.

Greg came to the congregation through a community service agency, which provided him with a system of support. When he started attending worship, he met with the pastor to share about his past. He also gave the pastor permission to talk with his parole officer.

They worked together to create some boundaries for Greg while he was at church, such as having someone with him at all times when in the presence of children. Two men from the congregation volunteered to serve as “companions” with him during worship.

The pastor informed the Church Council, staff, and parents of his presence and boundaries.

The pastor talked with me about the situation, and I referred her to several articles about welcoming sex offenders in congregations (see the end of this article). One of the criteria for not welcoming an offender is if any of an offender's victims are already members of the congregation. I learned that was not the case for this man.

I suggested that we have a refresher training for the congregation on child sexual abuse—how it happens, how to identify it, how to prevent it, and how to report it. There is a woman in our congregation who does these kinds of trainings for the synod, so the pastor asked her to lead two of trainings, one on Sunday and one on Wednesday night.

I further suggested a review of our “safe church” policies to help protect the well-being of children in our care. They were adopted several years ago, so it was time to update them anyway, including anything that may pertain to welcoming an offender into the congregation. That review is currently underway.

One of the men who served as a companion for the offender asked me for resources to help him in his role. I had just received information from Gabrielle Gipson (see article below) about training she was offering pertaining to welcoming sex offenders in a congregation. He went to that training and found it very helpful.

One of the suggestions of those trainings was to create an “accountability group” for the offender with which he could talk regularly to work through challenges and handle times of stress. Six members of the congregation agreed to be a part of this group.

I also referred our pastor to Barbara Keller, the ELCA Consultant for the Prevention of Sexual Misconduct (see E-Quipped article above). Barbara recommended telling

the entire congregation about the offender's presence and participation in the congregation. Although he was not required by his parole conditions to inform the congregation of his status, Greg was also interested in letting the congregation know of his past.

Barbara reviewed a "Covenant of Accountability" written by the pastor which outlined the responsibilities of the congregation and the offender and the boundaries for his participation in the congregation. This Covenant was signed by the pastor, the congregation president, a representative of the accountability group, and the offender. The pastor included a copy of this Covenant in a letter to the congregation, letting members know of the offender's presence and boundaries.

It has been a challenging time in terms of working through difficult conversations and coming to grips with the reality of the situation. It has also been a time of grace and hope in which the congregation has been able to provide support to help Greg not re-offend.

What we learned:

- Each offender is unique in terms of the severity of their offenses, targeted age group/gender, and likelihood of re-offense. Talk to Barbara Keller or others who are experts with this population to better understand their needs and boundaries.
- Grace and forgiveness do not require forgetting about the past or being naïve about the potential for re-offense. Accountability and boundaries are completely appropriate.
- There are resources for supporting offenders as they journey back into society.
- Have conversations within a church committee about these matters before an offender wants to join (as suggested by Barbara Keller) so a process is in place once it happens.

Helpful resources:

[Responding to a Sex Offender in a Congregation](#)

[Applying Law and Gospel to Victims and Perpetrators of Child Sexual Abuse](#)

Pages 14-17 specifically speak about applying the law to perpetrators.

[Godly Response to Abuse in the Christian Environment](#)

This includes information about safe church policies and what to do when an offender wants to join a congregation. It suggests that the whole congregation needs to be informed when a sex offender is in their midst. Also, it speaks to the concerns of victims of sexual abuse.

You Have the Power to Prevent and Heal Harm

Written by Ginny Rudloff, from a phone interview with Gabrielle Gipson, founder of You Have The Power

Gabrielle Gipson's life is the story behind [You Have the Power](#), a restorative justice organization based on the prevention and healing of harm, especially sexual harm. Beginning at age 8, Gabrielle was the victim of multiple sexual offenses for more than 25 years.

After working with businesses to implement new software, she realized that staff members' reluctance to implement the software was based on their lack of having a voice in the matter. That realization along with her own experience as a survivor merged into an understanding of what is needed to manage change.

She wrote a book, *Thrivorship: Power Tools for Success*, and began applying those tools from her own life to the business world. General society and victim services tend to think that a victim of sexual abuse can at best be a survivor. Her book teaches people how to go from surviving to thriving. Gabrielle believes that thrivorship relies heavily on faith in God, forgiveness, and accepting that perpetrators are not the monsters we believe them to be. She felt called by God to be the bridge between the community and offenders.

Over time Gabrielle engaged in conversations with [Stop It Now!](#) and had meetings with professionals, offenders, and survivors. She discovered that these dialogues cracked open the door to healing for survivors, offenders, and the community.

In 2008, Gabrielle was hired by the Minnesota Department of Corrections to develop Circles of Support and Accountability. She recruited and trained volunteers to work with Level 2 sex offenders coming out of prison. She worked at this for about 18 months, talking to churches, developing frequently asked questions, and marketing the program. She felt, for the first time, that her victimization made a difference.

After a short stint with a large software company where she experienced abuse through language and behavior, Gabrielle became isolated and once more moving into survivor mode. She left the company and began the process of figuring out how she could combine her experience, her conviction that she was meant to be talking about sexual abuse, and her belief in God to help others find healing and recovery. All of these elements morphed passion and ministry into the development of *You Have the Power*.

You Have the Power provides restorative justice services such as Healing Circles, Family Conferencing, and a Community Empowerment Program. These services address the harms, conflicts, and trauma we all experience with the goal to restore people and communities through courageous dialogue.

In addition to restorative justice, *You Have the Power* provides Welcome Homes, a ministry to manage and support offenders as they transition into the community. Circles of Support meet regularly to facilitate the transitioning person's practical needs, to challenge behaviors and attitudes, and to develop constructive strategies for handling everyday issues. Gabrielle recommends that the church offer a circle of support for the individual if they are new to reentering the community due to incarceration. Some people are new to a church, but have been out of prison for twenty years and may not need a circle of support.

You Have the Power also assists organizational leaders to develop policies that help offenders transition into the work place, churches, and other venues. *You Have the Power* encourages organizations and communities to talk to the offender, to get to know about them as a full person, not just about their offense, which may have happened many years ago. Until you know the person and some facts, your perceived fear is running the show. They offer "Abuse Proof Your Kid" and other training and

consulting to help inform organizations about what their policies need to be.

She recommends plugging the offender into an activity or committee, just as you would any new member. It offers an opportunity for everyone to get to know each other, build relationships, and serve one another.

Churches should also disclose the presence of an offender. How that is done depends on how the church operates within its own structure. Is it hierarchical or are decisions made by small groups of people? What is right for that church? What does the church policy say about screening, training, monitoring, touch, hugs, and the process for reporting?

Congregations should be prepared to answer the question, “Is your faith community safe?” If a sex offender wants to join the congregation, are you prepared to offer a worship environment that is safe for children (perhaps a worship service that is not attended by children)? Do you have members who are willing to serve as a chaperone or belong to a circle of support? Where can or can’t the offender go? What are the physical boundaries? Are there keys to building areas where the offender can’t go? Under what conditions can they serve in the church? How can your community hate the sin and still love the sinner?

Write policies that are inclusive, not exclusive, and still keep the overall community safe. Download the [Is Your Faith Community Safe?](#) checklist to assist in making your community loving and safe.

We must never forget that 90 percent of sex abuse victims were abused by someone they know, and only about 25 percent of these offenders are caught. This means that you already know and have a relationship with them and allow them to participate in the community freely.

Ultimately, Gabrielle tells us we must all know about the behaviors of a sex offender and be aware of the indicators of victimization, because the best predictor of someone never offending again is being caught.

Learn more about You Have the Power by visiting their [website](#) to volunteer or utilize their services.

In what ways are you praying for children and families?

Send your ideas to Erica Larson, E-Quipped Coordinator (elarson@lakenokomis.org), by June 15 for the July 2015 issue of *E-quipped for Prevention*. The topic for July is “Prayer” - Praying for the children in our congregation and communities.

Please send stories of ways that you or others have included prayer as a part of your efforts to care for and prevent the sexual exploitation of children.

Encouragement Circles - Just for you!

Getting your congregation involved in preventing child sexual exploitation can be challenging. One way to help yourself stay focused and energized and healthy is to be in an “Encouragement Circle.”

An Encouragement Circle is 4-5 people who get-together by phone once a month.

Each participant has an opportunity to share a joy, frustration, challenge, or idea and then ask the group for whatever help is needed. "Help" may be a listening ear, prayer, ideas, strategies, encouragement - the participant decides what he/she needs from the others in the group.

Interested? Contact ahartman@cherishchildren.org for more information.

Cherish All Children

Cherish All Children is a national Lutheran ministry of prayer, education, relationship-building, and action to prevent child sexual exploitation.

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We believe that "Love born of faith in Jesus Christ calls us all to attend to, discuss, resist, and reject the system of sexual exploitation"
([ELCA Message on Commercial Sexual Exploitation](#), pg. 1.)

You are invited to [give financially](#) to support this ministry. Donations are tax-deductible to the extent allowed by law.

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[Follow this link to learn how!](#)

Cherish All Children
PO Box 583772
Minneapolis, MN 55458-3772
612.280.1259
www.cherishchildren.org