

SEX OFFENDERS AND CHURCH ATTENDANCE

The Christian church is unique in that, based on the uncompromising message of the gospel, it opens its doors to all. It has also been known for some time that a significant number of sexual offenders living in the community also attend church. This may come as a surprise to some, a shock to others, and it is likely to stir up all sorts of feelings and strong opinions. On a personal level if you are told, or you find out, that a sexual offender has joined or plans to join your church, what is your reaction and what should you do to ensure others, (children and adults) who also attend your church are protected? This booklet attempts to answer some of these dilemmas and includes comments from a pastor and a sexual offender ('D') in this situation.

How do I feel?

It is perfectly understandable to be fearful, panicky or, at the very least, apprehensive. Perhaps you feel angry at the thought that someone who has abused children or adults should even be allowed back into the community. There are probably others in your church that, if they knew, would feel exactly the same. Whilst it is important to acknowledge your feelings, any information you have concerning an offender should only be shared on a 'need to know' basis with the leadership in the church who are responsible for ensuring that appropriate safeguards are in place.

What do you mean by 'sexual offender'?

A sexual offender is someone who has committed sexual offences against either children or adults. In this guide we are primarily referring to people who have offended against children or vulnerable adults. Sexual offences include rape, indecent assault and indecent exposure, exposing children to pornography, and encouraging children to perform sexual acts on themselves, other children or the offender. They also include looking at images of children being abused or photographed in provocative poses. These are called indecent images of children (IIOC).

A number of sexual offenders will have downloaded child abuse images. Others will have made these images or distributed them to others as well as possessing them. Whilst some offenders will also have gone on to 'hands-on' offending, others may gather large collections of images on their computer. These offences are often described as 'child pornography' but this is inaccurate as every image captures an actual situation where a child has been abused, therefore a more appropriate term is indecent images of children (IIOC).

Some sexual offenders target children at a specific stage of sexual development. Others do not discriminate in this way and may also target adults who they see as vulnerable in some way. Most target children of a particular gender, but some target both.

Most offenders "groom" victims by forming a friendship with them, giving gifts, praise etc. so that the child or adult is comfortable in their presence and trusts them. They also groom parents, carers and others in the community to gain their confidence that it is alright for them to be around their family. This grooming is very subtle and is usually more recognisable by outsiders than by those being groomed. Lone parent families, as well as children from low-income families, are often targeted. Most people

think of a sexual offender as a lone adult male because this is the image frequently portrayed by the media. Such offenders actually represent between a third and a half of the total. A significant number of allegations of sexual crimes are against other children and young people (between a quarter and a third). Allegations against women account for up to a quarter and groups of offenders a similar amount also.

It needs to be borne in mind that offences are often not reported. However, Thirtyone:eight have dealt with serious cases of abuse referred by churches relating to all these different types of offenders.

Whilst most abuse of children happens in families; it is important to realise that children of any age may be at risk of abuse by an offender who is part of your church. You should not therefore be complacent about the risks to a child whatever their age and never assume that because, as far as you know, the offender abused younger children they would be safe with an older age group. Any safeguards must be applied across the board! We also know that abuse of adults can be by family members, by carers within the home or within care homes or hospitals.

What are the on-going risks?

Sexual offenders often display addictive or repetitive behaviour towards their victims. For this reason, however repentant a sexual offender may appear to be, there are no cast-iron guarantees that they will not re-offend. Even if the offender has undergone treatment or received prayer ministry, they should not be assumed to be safe.

For some worshipping communities there is sometimes a denial that sexual offenders from within their own culture would frequent their place of worship. The fact that an individual demonstrates they are “Born Again” or is “Spirit-filled” is often the only requirement to place them within a position of trust within that community. Sexual offenders are present in all cultures, regardless of ethnicity and religious affiliation. Therefore, good sense safeguarding policies and procedures should not be disregarded purely because someone has had a spiritual renewal or experience.

True repentance is a change in thinking and behaviour, to “go and sin no more” so, apart from safeguarding considerations, in support of the repentant offender’s desire not to fall again we should not place them in a position of vulnerability where they could be tempted to re-offend. Sexual offenders need to be regarded in the same way as someone who has an addiction.

Whilst some offenders when arrested feel relief that their offending behaviour has been stopped, many initially refuse to admit that they have committed an offence and may continue to deny their guilt. This denial can be reinforced by family members who cannot accept the facts. (See Appendix 13 “Someone I care about may be a sex offender” further down this document).

Those offenders who represent a risk to children should be monitored closely and strict boundaries placed on their movements and behaviour within the church setting. A small group needs to be told of the situation; a contract written regarding the conditions necessary. There are three options.

- In some parts of church life, for example, morning worship, the offender must be monitored and discreetly supervised.

- Where provision cannot be made to monitor the individual at meetings involving children or adults who are vulnerable, it may be necessary to ensure that such offenders only attend meetings where those who are vulnerable are not present which may mean for the person not to attend morning worship where large numbers of those who are vulnerable may be present.
- Some churches have created a home group with the person specifically in mind and where other members of the group know of the circumstances. It is important that such a group does not include families with children or is held in a house where children reside.

What can we do?

Having described the worst-case scenario, it is possible to help those who accept that what they have done is wrong and want to change. When they leave prison or the criminal court, they may feel:

- Worried about how people will react
- Frightened in case the temptation to re-offend overcomes them
- Guilty and ashamed
- Isolated and lonely.

‘D’: ‘When leaving prison, society doesn’t exactly welcome you with open arms. I did have support from friends and family but generally people don’t trust ex-offenders. I felt like a second-class citizen’.

Like anyone, an offender wanting to change will need people around them who will love and accept them, offering care and protection with the assurance that God does not reject them. Alongside this, the people supporting the offender will need to:

1. Challenge risky or wrong thinking and behaviour.
2. Not allow themselves to be manipulated.
3. be relied upon to be supportive to help maintain self-control.

We encourage the setting up of Support and Accountability Groups, particularly for high-risk offenders, which can provide a group of people not only to share any necessary chaperoning and monitoring of the offender in church, but also provide a context in which they can address and be supported through the issues they face in life. They will be held to account for their thinking and behaviour, develop a range of close relationships with adults and be disciplined, all of which are key to maintaining an offence-free lifestyle and not giving into temptation.

On-going monitoring is essential, and it is important that, with changes of staff and leadership over time, knowledge of the offender is passed on to new leaders or staff. It is important that the offender is never placed in a position of trust including leadership, a door welcomer, a leader of worship, a reader

or member of a worship band. All these roles suggest that the person is trustworthy and may lead others not to see the risk they may pose.

In every situation a careful assessment needs to be made as to whether the church can safely and adequately work with the person. Seek the help of police and probation in carrying out risk assessments which need to consider the details of offending and subsequent behaviour and attitudes. You will also need to take into account your own church circumstances, accepting the fact that some people will be just too risky and may need to be helped to find another fellowship where the risk to children can be more easily managed.

'D': 'I know I can phone if I'm in trouble. I know they want to help me. These people give up their free time. It's about feeling like a person again, not a number'.

What about boundaries?

Behavioural boundaries need to be put in place. These should help the offender feel secure and less at risk of false accusations. Most importantly, these boundaries will serve to protect children and young people who attend church activities.

- An offender should not be permitted to get close to children or adults who are vulnerable (either physically or emotionally)
- He or she should not sit in the vicinity of children or known vulnerable adults at church or attend house/cell group meetings where there are children in the home.
- An offender should never be allowed to work with children and young people or with adults who are known to be vulnerable
- They should not hold positions of leadership or responsibility where they are seen by others as someone who can be trusted.
- They should not undertake any activity where they might be seen as in a position of trust. e.g., giving books out at the door, greeting people, reading the lesson, leading prayers or a bible study, because those roles are regarded as suitable for those who are trustworthy.

'D': Working to a contract is a helpful and necessary procedure for ex-offenders in the church. It helped me know what I could and couldn't do'.

Pastor: 'In the beginning I found myself policing him, thinking and worrying whether it was going to work. Now, my pastoral team take care of this and I am more relaxed'.

Internet sexual offending includes not only indecent images of children but also online grooming, so helping an offender with online boundaries may also be needed.

See also; Thirtyone:eight Practice Guide – Contracts and Agreements.

What about forgiveness?

An offender needs pastoral care to help them deal with the spiritual and emotional aspects of their life. They may feel that their sins are too awful for God to forgive, that they can never change or be healed of their own hurts. A pastor or carer needs to distinguish between forgiveness by God and forgiveness offered to the offender by those abused.

Offenders do not always appreciate that the consequences of their behaviour can be devastating for the person(s) involved and forgiveness by the victim may take a considerable time. Some may choose not to forgive. Offenders need to know that they have no inherent right to be forgiven by those they have harmed.

An offender may feel that they could never forgive themselves for their actions. In acknowledging they have done wrong they need to know that God forgives them and because of this they can forgive themselves. That is not to say they should forget what has happened and neither should the church. One offender commented that remembering his offence was a reminder to him to keep certain boundaries so that he would not be tempted to re-offend.

What about confidentiality?

Confidentiality is an important principle in any dealings with people in pastoral situations. However, where safety may be compromised, confidentiality has to take second place to the protection of others. Open communication with the person who has offended and sharing information with the police and probation service are vital for the protection of children and adults who are vulnerable. A church leader may be given confidential information by one of the statutory agencies that cannot be shared with the wider church. However, leaders responsible for children and vulnerable adults can be made aware of any boundaries that are in place without being given details of the offender's history. This is an important distinction; to know the boundaries without the reasons.

What about people who have never been convicted of an offence?

Most people who offend against children are not convicted. We know this by the number of adults admitting to unreported sexual offences against them as children and the number of cases reported to the police actually resulting in a conviction (about 5%). Even if an allegation is reported to the police, most are denied by the accused, and the case generally won't reach court if, for example, there is a lack of corroborative evidence or because it is not in the interests of the child or adult victim to take the matter further. For a case that reaches court, it is necessary for a jury to find someone guilty 'beyond all reasonable doubt'. Unless the jury agree on a verdict, the person will be found not guilty.

Where there are reasonable grounds for concern, churches will still need to respond even if the allegation is denied and in particular by applying appropriate boundaries. Failure to do so could place vulnerable adults and children at risk and it is also in the interests of someone who feels they have been falsely accused to work within given boundaries in order to minimise the possibility of further allegations.

Support for offenders - not an optional extra

Supporting offenders safely in the church is fundamental if others are to be protected from abuse. Safeguarding policies and good working practice are vital. If general procedures are in place and working, spelling out, for example, who has access to the crèche, then sudden changes do not have to be initiated immediately a person with a known problem comes to church. Having said this it is

important, as a matter of course, to review policies and procedures on a regular basis, whether or not a known offender joins the church.

We cannot be all things to all people. For example, a church with one meeting room overflowing with children cannot provide appropriately for a high-risk offender. In this situation the church could seek the help of another local church who may be in a better position to provide a safer environment. Alternatively, the church may minister to an individual outside of public meetings. For example, in some situations offenders have been restricted to attendance at a particular cell group.

Part of a bigger package

The help and pastoral support available in the church needs to run alongside the monitoring of the individual by police and probation. Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements (MAPPA) exist in all areas. MAPPA places a duty on the police, the probation service and the prison authorities to assess and manage risks posed by offenders in every community in England and Wales. Similar arrangements apply elsewhere in the UK. They do this work in partnership with other agencies including health services, housing, social care etc. Where an offender is subject to a supervision plan it will be vital for churches to work closely with these agencies both in order to reduce risk and also to understand how the church can positively contribute to the supervision plan as well as the offender's relapse prevention or "better life" plan.

MAPPA guidance issued in 2009 by National Offender Management Service (NOMS) Public Protection Unit, Section 6.5, 'Offenders and Worship', stresses that MAPPA should work in partnership with places of worship and "that religious leaders should be provided with sufficient information to protect their congregation" Page 70. The guidance has been updated in 2012, 2014 and 2016. This guidance also says, 'Any breaches of the 'contract' with the offender must be reported to the offender/ case manager'. Therefore, it is important to contact the police/probation at an early stage and involve them in attending meetings and/or setting the contract where possible.

Further help and resources

The UK has led the world in sexual offending treatment programmes. There are accredited programmes in many prisons as well as community-based services. Research shows that those who complete treatment are less likely to fantasise about children or deny they harmed their victims and are therefore less likely to re-offend. It is vital that any help provided by the church is not seen as a substitute for working with the statutory agencies. It will also be important in any contract arrangement with an offender to emphasise keeping to agreed programmes and meeting the expectations of supervising agencies. If we are to gain full co-operation from an offender it is important that the Agreement, we put in place is discussed and agreed with them, possibly asking them what they think should be helpfully included, and is proportional to the risk they pose, reflects their pattern of offending and also their needs in terms of pastoral support.

Over the years, Thirtyone:eight has pioneered work with sexual offenders in churches. This whole area is dealt with in detail in our safeguarding manual 'Safe and Secure'. It covers all the issues outlined above including working with perpetrators, and the model contract suggested between church and offender has been adopted by a number of mainstream denominations and many individual churches. We will also provide help and support in regard to individual cases which might include meeting with church leadership teams to help them deal with such issues and in some areas deliver direct training in working with sexual offenders in the church context.

Sexual offenders are not born as sexual offenders. Their sexual attraction to children developed mainly through their childhood experiences of abuse, be it emotional, physical, mental or sexual. They are typically people with low self-esteem, emotionally lonely and unable to relate deeply to adults, and who, to quote a probation officer, feel “powerless to change and hopeless”. Many are full of shame for their activities, and that sense of shame may actually drive their sexual offending cycle. All of these characteristics, and more we have not mentioned, reflect what has come to be known in some Christian circles as an “orphan heart” and this gives us clues as to how we might fruitfully help them, for all of them are loved by God. The mandate for Christ’s life, which we have inherited, was to heal the broken-hearted, set captives free, bring recovery of sight to the blind (self-deceived people?), to proclaim the Lord’s favour etc. (Isaiah 61).

Key things to take away

A sexual offender is someone who has committed sexual offences against either children or adults. Whilst most abuse of children happens in families; it is important to realise that children of any age may be at risk of abuse by an offender who is part of your church.

Those offenders who represent a risk to children should be monitored closely and strict boundaries placed on their movements and behaviour within the church setting.

Like anyone, an offender wanting to change will need people around them who will love and accept them, offering care and protection with the assurance that God does not reject them.

Supporting offenders safely in the church is fundamental if others are to be protected from abuse. Thirtyone:eight provides training and advice on all areas of child protection and good working practice to churches, organisations and individuals across the UK as well as a 24-hour helpline service.

The Lucy Faithful Foundation

A national safeguarding agency working with perpetrators of child sexual abuse.

Tel: 01527 591 922

Web: www.lucyfaithfull.org.uk

Circles of Support and Accountability

A Community support system for sexual offenders

Tel: 0118 950 0068

Web: www.circles-uk.org.uk

Stop It Now!

A national campaign that aims to prevent child abuse by encouraging offenders to seek help.

Email: help@stopitnow.org.uk

Web: www.stopitnow.org.uk

CONTRACTS AND AGREEMENTS

Writing and managing a contract with;

- A person who has a conviction / convictions of violence or sexual harm to children or adults
- A person who has been accused of a violent or sexual offence
- A person whose behaviour is of concern and they have ignored advice

Stage 1 – calling a meeting

The person of concern needs to be invited to attend a meeting with a small group of people who may have professional expertise (police, social worker, prison officer, probation). If this is not possible, the attendees need to be people who are interested in supporting but also monitoring the person of concern. If the person is on the Sex Offenders or Violent and Sex Offenders Register, the police liaison officer can be invited to the meeting.

Stage 2 – church activities

A list needs to be made of all the activities which take place in the church building and are the responsibility of the church. This will be all the mid-week groups as well as the Sunday Services, but not the meetings which are leased by outside organisations or freely given to other organisations.

Stage 3 – risk assessment

Go through all the meetings and state which the person can attend (such as a concert), cannot attend at all (tea and toddlers or a social group for adults with disabilities), or can attend with supervision (worship).

Stage 4 – the contract

State which groups the person cannot attend and should not be in the building. State which groups the person can attend and what the supervision arrangements are. The contract must be signed by the person and all attendees.

Stage 5 – review meeting

The next meeting is arranged and there is discussion about how the terms of the contract have been adhered to, whether there have been any breaches (if so, any statutory authorities must be informed) and whether the terms of the contract need to be changed.

Some Examples:

Scenario A

Jack has been released from prison for a number of sexual offences against teenagers and young adults. He is on the sex offender's register. Whilst in prison he became friendly with the chaplain and now professes a faith. The church has one service on a Sunday morning with a large all age congregation. In the week, there is a youth club, a ladies bible group, a job club using computers for searching for jobs and a number of home groups. The contract stipulates that Jack must not be on the premises during the youth club night and the lady's bible group.

He is permitted to attend a specific home group where there are no under 18's or young adults in the group/household. He can attend morning worship as long as he sits in a particular place at the back of the church, and this will be within sight of one of the group members. He knows that if he leaves the service to use the toilets, he will be accompanied to the facilities. During coffee one of the groups will sit with him and ensure he does not initiate contact with any under 18's or young adults. The police are going to speak to the job club leader about the computers used for the job searches to ensure that unsuitable websites cannot be accessed.

At the review meeting, one member shared that Jack had formed a relationship with a 25-year-old young woman who is regarded as being vulnerable. The police are to be contacted to be informed of this information.

Scenario B

Joanna was a nursery worker. Four months into her contract she was dismissed from her post. A three-year-old had made an allegation about inappropriate touching but the matter did not proceed due to the age of the child and potential unreliability of the verbal evidence. However, the nursery found that she had breached their protocol about the toilet routines and had frequently been taking children into the toilets alone, even those who were capable of using the toilet independently. Joanna has asked to work in the crèche at church and gave this information on her self- declaration form.

She says she is passionate about working with children and wants a chance to prove her skills. A contract meeting was arranged and decided that she cannot work with any of the children's groups and cannot attend any home group where there are children in the household. She is also barred from

agreeing to babysit if asked and from joining social media as a friend with any under 18's. Joanna feels aggrieved about these rules but was reminded that nobody has a right to be a children's worker and that appointments have to be made on the grounds of suitability.

As she was dismissed from the nursery, it is likely that this would be raised as a blemish on any DBS check. The contract group meet with Joanna every six months and are trying to support her in pursuing new areas of interest and employment.

Scenario C

Bill is an eighty-year-old widower. Complaints have been made at church from a number of older women about him hugging them enthusiastically without being asked and kissing them on their mouths. This has caused a couple of the women great distress. Bill has been told about this on a number of occasions, but he has said that the women like it and 'it's all political correctness'.

A small group is formed, and Bill is advised that he will be accompanied as soon as he enters church, during the 'passing of the peace' and until he leaves the building. The person with him will ensure that he does not approach any women whilst in the building. The group decides that until he can prove he is acting appropriately, he is banned from attending the midweek lunch. After a three-month period, the review will look at the contract again. Bill refuses to sign the contract at the first meeting, so his refusal is recorded.

Scenario D

Carl/Carly is on probation for a violent offence when he/she was home carer. He/She was seen by the householder, stealing money from a wallet and when challenged, hit out at the resident and was dismissed from his/her post. At the contract meeting, it was decided to allow him/her to attend church services and a home group where the leader is one of the contract group. He/she was permitted to attend the luncheon club as a helper in the kitchen.

However, was told that he/she is not permitted to attend the group where young adults with learning disabilities meet to socialise and play games. Carl/Carly has no interest in attending the play group or children's groups and that is recorded in the group minutes. Carl/Carly was seen having coffee with a woman who is disabled. The pastoral worker said that Carl/Carly had offered to do some cleaning for her and that they had met in the supermarket, with Carl/Carly saying she recognised her from the church luncheon club. The police were informed about this and the liaison officer went to speak to him/her to give a warning. This made the group feel that Carl/Carly's cooperation with the terms of the contract was more superficial than first believed and so the contract was reviewed to prevent him/her being on church premises at any time other than for Sunday worship and would be accompanied throughout.

SOMEONE I CARE ABOUT MAY BE A SEX OFFENDER

First Reactions

If you are in this situation and you sense there may be some truth behind the allegations, you are likely to experience a range of emotions. You may also need to make decisions that will have a significant impact not only on your own life but on the lives of other family members and those close to you.

Similarly, you may be shocked by the allegations and struggle to believe they are true. You may want to know what to do to in order to prove they are untrue. You are worried about people knowing, particularly if the situation is reported in the press.

Following the initial shock, there may be a sense of outrage, bewilderment and confusion. How could this happen? This person you thought you knew may have a dark side, a secret that you knew nothing about. How could you not have known? How could this secret have been kept hidden?

You may then feel disgusted, intense anger and betrayal. How could they let you down in such a way and expose you to public humiliation? If your own children have been affected this is perhaps the most difficult situation imaginable, to think that someone you loved and trusted could have harmed them without you knowing.

It is not unusual for partners, parents or friends to feel shame and a false sense of guilt. Sometimes they will question whether they are to blame for the abuse by not adequately meeting their partner's sexual needs, but this is never the cause of the sexual abuse of children. Feelings of shame are contagious; the closer you are the more you feel affected by it. It is also not uncommon for family and/or

friends to be convinced of the alleged abuser's innocence or remain in denial due to a misguided sense of loyalty.

The situation can become even more complex if, for example, a wife or mother wants to stand by her partner despite the allegations against him. It is crucial all allegations are investigated, and the truth established for the sake of everyone involved. Each situation is individual and social care, police liaison officers and those close to you whom you trust will be able to help determine the levels of risk and how to respond.

The Investigation Process

The statutory agencies (i.e., Children's or Adult Social Care, police) have a duty to respond to an allegation of abuse. Depending on the ages of the alleged victims and the seriousness of the allegation, children and vulnerable adults, in particular, may be interviewed by a specially trained social worker and / or police officer. The person accused of the allegation may also be interviewed by the police. Following an arrest, the family may well be advised to discuss the situation on a 'need to know' basis only due to the obvious sensitivities and adverse reactions of others. This is a very difficult and stressful time because those involved have to live with some degree of uncertainty. Partners, in particular, may feel they are in an impossible situation especially if the allegation is denied.

A natural reaction to anything that contradicts what we think we know is to dismiss or deny it. Some thoughts are just too disturbing and unpleasant to entertain, and that's one of the reasons why there is so much denial surrounding sexual abuse. 'It couldn't happen!' is a common response. Most of us prefer to live in a world that conforms to our expectations. It needs to be recognised that with regard to sexual abuse, it can and does happen – much more frequently than we would like to think. It happens in all sorts of situations; it happens to all sorts of children, and all sorts of people are perpetrators.

The caricature of the 'evil paedophile' portrayed in the media really doesn't help. If you think about it, what child will trust such a frightening character or allow someone like that to get close to them? Sex offenders are, in other respects, ordinary people just like anyone else. To acknowledge the possibility of a child we know being abused by a person we know may require us to suspend disgust, disbelief and/or an instinct to defend them. Being open to the possibility that such a thing could have happened is very hard when we are close to the person involved. However, we owe it to the child or adult to take what they are saying seriously.

After the investigation

The aim of an investigation is to try to determine whether abuse has actually occurred. Unfortunately, this isn't always possible. If a perpetrator admits the abuse, then this makes working with them and thereby reducing the risk of re-offending more likely to be successful. If they continue to deny the allegations, then some degree of uncertainty may remain even after the investigation has ended.

Quite often there is an absence of corroborative evidence; it is the word of the victim(s) against that of the alleged perpetrator. This is one of the main reasons many allegations of sexual abuse never reach the courts. In other situations, the matter does go to Court which can take a long time and there can be

many hold-ups along the way. The whole situation can be frightening and confusing. Meanwhile, you might feel your life is on hold, waiting for the outcome.

However, even if there is insufficient evidence to proceed with a criminal prosecution, Children's Services can still take action if they consider a child is at risk of significant harm. This can include a protection plan being prepared in respect of any children involved and in the most serious situations, an application can be made to the court for a child to be placed in care.

Don't rush into making decisions

The impact of such an experience should never be underestimated. If a parent (usually a woman) discovers her partner may be guilty of abuse, she is likely to have to make some agonising decisions over what is best for the whole family. The children's immediate safety and well-being is paramount, and this could mean a period of separation from her partner. It is important she doesn't feel under pressure or rush into making decisions that are going to affect the long-term future or her family.

An inconclusive outcome

There are some cases where the outcome of an investigation is inconclusive and this presents challenges for everyone involved, the authorities, partners, parents, relatives, friends, and the church in some cases. We have said already, that those close to the alleged abuser can find it very difficult to accept the allegations of victims. This may be, in part, because they don't have all the information surrounding the allegations. They may only hear the abuser's denials and/or minimisations and the victim, whose confidentiality is protected, is not heard. When there is a court hearing then at least the evidence is out in the open. This can help challenge an abuser's denials and help to bring some sort of closure for those affected.

A false allegation is a possibility but as allegations are generally denied anyway, proving guilt or innocence is often not possible. If doubts remain not only can this be difficult to live with but the potential risk to children or vulnerable adults remains.

Offering support

If you want to continue to offer support to someone suspected/convicted of abuse your acceptance of them, whatever the outcome of the investigation, can make a real difference. The fact that you don't reject them even though you find their alleged or actual behaviour abhorrent can provide hope for the future. The allegations and the investigation will undoubtedly have a life-long impact, even when unsubstantiated. Major readjustments may need to be made and things are unlikely ever to be the same again. It is possible to support the person even when what they have done or been accused of causes you great upset.

Facing the consequences – keeping in contact

The sexual abuse of children is a serious criminal offence and if convicted the person may serve a prison sentence. Sex offenders often feel lonely, isolated, and unforgivable, so contact made by, say, a pastoral carer can be a lifeline. Regular visits by family or friends can help keep valued relationships alive and make reintegration into society easier. However, pressure should not be exerted, and victims never coerced into visiting the offender. Children, in particular, are vulnerable to suggestion and might well feel that it's their fault the person is in prison.

Forgiveness and Restoration

Confession and forgiveness are central themes of the Christian faith. A sincere apology can make a real difference to all those affected, though this should never be allowed to become yet another way of the offender gaining control over the people involved.

Neither does this mean that the offender will not have to live with the consequences of their actions, carrying on with their lives as though nothing had happened? However repentant they may have been, and even though they may have sought forgiveness from God and their victim(s), it does not mean that they might not re-offend when faced with the same situation. Also, it is important to bear in mind that some victims will choose not to forgive. Others may struggle to reach a place where they can forgive an offender.

Due to the addictive nature of sex offending, a judge may decide it is not safe for the person to return home because they are considered too great a risk. Equally, family members may not want the person back even if there has been an admission of guilt, a desire to change and/or put things right. Family members and others may not want any contact with the person or only on a restricted or supervised basis.

An offender may attend a rehabilitation programme which also helps the probation service assess future risk. They can feel overwhelmed at the prospect of change, particularly to their lifestyle, as what was once considered ordinary activities, such as giving lifts to children, become out of bounds. One offender, realising the gravity of what they had done stated, 'I have learnt that I have to put boundaries around myself for the rest of my life'.

Reintegration – Is this possible?

It is important to recognise that churches cannot be all things to all people, but efforts can be made to ensure pastoral care is available without compromising the safety of children. On release from prison or as part of on-going supervision, churches should make contact with and act on the advice of the probation service and/or MAPP (Multi-agency Public Protection Arrangements) and if the person's name is placed on the Sex Offenders Register, they will be required to give a known address and information about community groups they join (including churches). MAPP assesses and manages the most serious sexual and violent offenders. With the aid of these statutory agencies, a risk assessment can be carried out. In some situations, the individual can be referred to another church where, for example, there are no children and/or they can be properly supervised.

Reintegration into the family home where an offender has abused their child(ren) is rare. It sometimes happens following much work with the offender and the partner agreeing to a monitoring role, much like a police/probation officer. In any event, you, as the partner, parent or friend of the person may be in a position to help them accept any statutory supervision and other requirements. This might include limitations placed upon them in relation to contact with children, particularly in a church situation where they may need to abide by a written contract. A contract does not mean an automatic ban from church life - rather a supervised arrangement where the offender can be valued and supported.