



# KEEPING CHILDREN, CHURCHES, AND SCHOOLS SAFE FROM SEX OFFENDERS PART 4

“Jay” was the president of a local college and an elder in the church. His wife volunteered as a teacher for children’s ministries and the couple’s teenaged daughters were active in the youth group. When the family agreed to host a foreign exchange student, everyone at church welcomed the high school girl with open arms.

Six months later, the student disclosed to a school counselor that Jay had been sexually abusing her. When police interviewed Jay’s daughters, one of them acknowledged that Jay had been abusing her as well. Jay adamantly denied that he “would never hurt a child,” but when the allegations became public, another young woman said Jay had behaved inappropriately toward her during a church outing several years earlier.

As the criminal case went forward, people took sides. Some said they’d known Jay for years and refused to believe that he could have done any of the things the girls said he did. Other people supported Jay’s wife and daughters and were angry that Jay’s supporters were further victimizing the girls by accusing them of lying. Jay was eventually convicted and sentenced to prison but the church was left to deal with the aftermath of what he’d done and how people had reacted to the allegations. It took years for the church to get past the damage and just as the wounds were healing, Jay was released from prison.

Upon his release, Jay asked the pastor if he could return to church. The pastor told Jay he’d have to consult with the elders. Jay’s family still attended the church and people had strong feelings about what he’d done and how they should respond to his request. No one knew how to handle the situation. Jay eventually opted to join a church that was not aware of his past, and perhaps, less prepared to deal with him.

Sex offenders can impact churches in a variety of ways. Even if the offenses didn’t occur on church property or during a church related

activity, the consequence can be disastrous. If the offender was a church leader, Pathfinder or Adventurer volunteer, teacher or pastor, the repercussions are usually worse, especially if the offender met and “groomed” the victim and his/her family at church. Granted, there aren’t any policies that will completely guarantee safety but there are many things churches and schools can do to decrease risk and send offenders the right message, “we are doing everything we can to protect our children and will not tolerate abuse!”

Several years after “Jay” participated in sex offender treatment in my clinic, I treated a teacher who’d offended numerous boys in Seventh-day Adventist schools. His crimes were eventually discovered, but only after he’d molested dozens of boys in the North American Division. After he was released from prison, he was referred to sex offender treatment in Oregon and told me he’d purposefully targeted schools he thought were “gullible and naive” and would “fall for my grooming tactics.”

He said he determined which schools were the “easiest targets” during pre-employment interviews and was usually able to see which schools had windows in doors and classrooms that were “more secluded” during tours of the schools. He was such an outstanding teacher and always had plenty of offers. In those days schools didn’t conduct thorough reference checks the way they do now.

What I concluded from working with this particular offender was that background checks, the “two person rule,” windows in classroom doors and rules about appropriate boundaries between students and teachers were all important, but that in-service training about offender behavior was probably more important. Background checks offer minimal protection because, as mentioned in previous articles, only a minority of offenders are ever reported and prosecuted for their crimes.

Training helps everyone understand what’s expected, reinforces the “no

tolerance for abuse” message and makes sure everyone is clear about what’s appropriate and what needs to be reported. Reviewing policies also eliminates the possibility for staff to say they “didn’t know the rules” and might “weed out” potential offenders when they realize how serious the church or school is about preventing, detecting, and reporting abuse. Staff members also report that specialized training helps them feel more confident about confronting and reporting inappropriate behavior if they see it. The training also minimizes the potential risk they face as employees.

Once an offender is identified or convicted, another set of policies needs to be in place for those offenders who are given permission to attend church. The way in which churches develop and implement “chaperone agreements,” “participation agreements” or “church safety plans” varies greatly, but always requires cautious and thoughtful decision making about how the information is communicated to the congregation. Each church should develop a comprehensive policy about which offenders (low, medium or high risk) will be allowed to attend which type of services (Sabbath services vs. adult Bible study classes) and be willing to implement participation/chaperone contracts in a consistent manner.

Serious problems can arise when congregations don’t understand church policies or the laws related to reporting child abuse. Members can mistakenly blame the pastor or leadership for doing the right thing. For this reason, policies should be reviewed with the congregation and everyone should be made aware of them before the church is faced with a crisis. Once it becomes personal and appears to be focused on a particular person, church members can become overly defensive and undermine the process. As one expert said, “it’s better to react with informed compassion than ignorant reaction.”

If offenders are treated differently, or if someone has been accused of a sexual offense but never convicted, the process can be more susceptible to complaints. For example, if one offender is allowed to attend regular services and another is not, the church needs to have a policy that accounts for the difference in the application of the rules. Another type of problem could arise if a member informs the church that they’ve been

abused by another member, perhaps an elder or parent, 10 or 20 years earlier, and the accused member denies it. What should the church do then? If the church allows the accused to continue attending without any precautions, the church could be liable for any future crimes related to the accused’s involvement with the church. On the other hand, if the church demands that the accused member abide by a “participation/chaperone” agreement, he/she might become angry and threatening. Most churches believe they don’t have a choice once an allegation has surfaced because of the potential consequences of failing to manage the situation in a responsible and pro-active manner. Fortunately, one of the arguments that can appease the accused member is that the participation/chaperone agreement can also help prevent against false allegations.

With offenders who are willing to abide by a participation/chaperone/safety agreement, the agreement needs to specify who their chaperone will be and which activities they can participate in. Most churches require that the offender’s chaperone not be a relative. Participation agreements must also include rules about the offender’s access to areas frequented by children and special provisions for restroom use. Offenders should also be discouraged from seeking leadership positions and include restrictions about developing relationships with families who have children. Participation agreements should also include language that gives the church administration the right to inform leaders and members on an “as needed basis.” This may require a waiver of confidentiality and some churches have made “full disclosure to all members” a requirement for membership so no one in the church feels as if they were kept in the dark about something that might put their children at risk.

None of the issues related to managing sex offenders and child abuse prevention are comfortable topics and are therefore easily put off, sometimes until it’s too late. If you haven’t already created a child safety committee to study and develop a policy, do it now. Other conferences might be able to share what they have created. Adventist Risk Management, Inc. has additional resources you will find helpful at [www.AdventistRisk.org](http://www.AdventistRisk.org).



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Ms. Jensen has provided training and consultation to a number of law enforcement, child advocacy and Faith based organizations throughout the United States and Canada. She has also published a number of articles about sex offenders and risk management, testified as an expert witness, been the recipient of numerous awards, served on numerous committees to prevent child abuse, and been a featured guest on radio talk shows, and the Oprah Winfrey Show.

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