



Recommended Policies for C4SO Congregations Considering Incorporating Registered Sex Offenders Into the Life of the Church

Every congregation should consider how it will address the presence of registered sex offenders in the life of the congregation *before* a request is received from an offender who would like to participate in the life of the church. This has become an increasingly frequent issue in churches, as the number of registered sex offenders in the country is growing and is now more than 750,000.

Many registered sex offenders have been deeply convicted by their sin and turned to Christ, often sorting their lives out during time in incarceration. However, sex offenders who seek active involvement in a Christian community create a conflict for the local church, as the church seeks to minister to all who are truly penitent while also protecting the safety of the congregation.

Most sex offenders are willing to comply with the church's standards or seek a church home elsewhere. But the church must be aware of two categories of exceptions:

Category 1) Some sex offenders are so committed to proving that they are not as bad as the label "sex offender" suggests, that they will actively seek to rise above the rules. Often, their behavior in doing so will be generally directed toward either "negotiating" the process over time or seeking to bend obedience to policies in the hope of someday eliminating the policy requirements for them. The best way to address these individuals is clarity in explaining the content of the policy, rather than getting drawn into discussions on the prudence of the policy or the sex offenders "proving" themselves. Sex offenders must be willing to live in accordance with the policies as long as they are registered.

Category 2) The other category of sex offenders is those who are strongly inclined to repeated sexual violations. In regard to pedophilia in particular, the recidivism rate is extremely high. Those who have acted on these evil urges are rarely liberated from the temptation. Some in this

category may enthusiastically embrace the restrictions imposed on them at first, as part of a process by which they will engage in a violation later.

Typically church leadership does not have the experience to discern sex offenders who appear repentant but might engage in wrongful and destructive behavior later—possibly with those in the congregation. Therefore, it is important for the congregation to be clear on its policies and to enforce them to its utmost ability. Where the lines of behavior are clear up front, there is less likelihood of a violation of the policies later.

Of course, congregations have the option of simply refusing to allow sex offenders to be a part of their church. This may be appropriate for a variety of reasons, such as strong opposition by the members of the congregation, or the size of the church and the facilities it uses may not be conducive to a community being comfortable with the presence of a sex offender. Some churches may allow for the presence of registered sex offenders but wish to put the congregation on notice—with the name of the offender, along with the description of the crime committed, available to anyone who requests the information.

Congregations with very strong reservations about the presence of sex offenders in their fellowship should not pursue a policy. However, for those that wish to find a means of incorporating penitent sex offenders into their congregations, the Diocese recommends that churches follow the policies described below as a *minimum* standard for the protection of their congregations.

1. If possible, address the policy for your congregation before receiving a specific request from a registered sex offender to join your church.

The inclusion of registered sex offenders in the life of your church is a potentially divisive issue. It is best if leadership can get a sense of the congregation's tolerance for ministry to sex offenders in general, without there being a specific individual to consider.

2. After your congregation has decided to consider including registered sex offenders in the life of the church, gather all possible data on the conviction from the specific offender.

A thorough criminal background investigation is always needed, but collecting data from the offender directly can be very helpful. Background checks are expensive, and the costs can be reduced somewhat by first gathering the information the offender already has available. If the conviction was fairly recent, the offender may still be on probation. In that case, the requirements of probation and direct contact with the probation officer can be instructive. If the offender is not forthright and fails to disclose information that is later uncovered by the background check, church leadership may reconsider whether to allow that individual to join in church life.

3. Order a criminal background check.

Your church should be informed about the criminal background of any sex offender who becomes a part of the life of the church. Obtain a complete criminal record check on the individual, which includes convictions in other states than your own. Note that a criminal background check is different from a free search of an internet sex-offender database. While the cost of such searches is significant, it pales in comparison to the potential for damage if a church fails to take this simple step.

4. Seek legal counsel on limitations in church involvement within your jurisdiction.

Your church must consult local laws to assure that a sex offender can be involved in your church's life. Some states have strong limitations on what sex offenders are allowed to do when involved in, or even in close proximity to, organizations that have groups of youth within them. This definition can include churches.

5. Notify your church's liability insurer.

The presence of sex offenders undeniably increases a church's liability exposure. This may have consequences for liability coverage, and the insurer may have its own guidance on its expectations of the insured. Consider advice from your insurer before deciding whether to allow sex offenders into the life of your church.

6. Institute an "accountability partner" system.

The most important part of protecting the church community from infractions by registered sex offenders is the institution of an accountability partner system. The role of the accountability partner is very simple: sex offenders must be in the presence of an accountability partner at all times when a church event is taking place. The standards should be applied, not only on church property, but also at other locations that constitute church event locations, including meetings in homes. While it may appear off-putting to have an accountability partner in someone else's home (particularly if the sex offender is a guest at the home on occasions outside of church functions), it is important to maintain the standards. Incidences do arise of sex offenders engaging in predatory activity in homes. However, if this rule is carefully followed, the congregation will be well-protected.

Setting Up the Accountability Partner System

- **Number of Accountability Partners.** The Diocese recommends that the congregation have two more accountability partners than there are sex offenders in the congregation. Thus, the church should have three trained accountability partners in place before one sex offender is allowed to attend services or church programs.

- **Backup for Accountability Partners.** Before a sex offender is allowed to attend any church event, an accountability partner must be available to be present with the offender at all times while the event is in process. There will be times

when the presumed accountability partner is unavailable at the last minute. For example, when the partner's car breaks down on the way to church, or the partner becomes ill the morning of a church service. In such instances, having another partner available may make it possible for the offender to continue as planned in the presence of an alternate accountability partner. However, if no one else is available, the sex offender will be required to forego the church event, even if the offender has already arrived at the church.

· **Proximity of Accountability Partners.** Most often, the accountability partner should remain within a few feet of the sex offender. In group discussions, the accountability partner should be a part of the group in which the sex offender is participating; the accountability partner should not get sidetracked by conversations with others or they may lose the ability to observe the offender. The accountability partner need not sit next to the sex offender during a service or meeting. In fact, sitting behind the offender may allow for better observation. However, the partner should never sit in front of the registered sex offender, or in the same row with anyone in between them. Constant vigilance is the highest priority.

· **Protecting Children and Youth.** The accountability partner should steer the sex offender away from those parts of church life where children or youth congregate. There may be times when passing through youth areas is unavoidable—perhaps the offender's car is parked in a place where youth have congregated, or the offender's children are in need of attention. But the accountability partner should be highly attentive during those times to assure that no harmful patterns are developing. If, for example, the sex offender develops friendships with the parents of children who do not know of the offender's status, the accountability partner should discuss the issue with the sex offender and inform the parents of the issues. This requires wisdom and intentionality. If the sex offender's children become close to the children of other families in the church, monitoring can become very difficult. This may require documented discussions among all who are involved regarding boundaries that uphold the church's policies.

· **Regularly Scheduled Meetings with Accountability Partners.** The church's accountability partners should meet at regular intervals, such as quarterly, to assure that each one is informed regarding the others' experience with various offenders. There may be a time when more frequent meetings are appropriate. These should be a time when discussions of unusual behavior or comments by the sex offender are shared, so that everyone understands the potential problems. Should a sex offender make any potentially risk-disclosing comments or actions, then the accountability partner should contact church staff immediately. It is essential that none of the accountability partners have a higher

tolerance for violations than others, and that each is aware of their own vulnerability issues that might be exploited. The Rector, or a trusted alternate staff member, should be regularly involved in these meetings.

- **Qualities of Accountability Partners.** The accountability partner must remain vigilant and never lose sight of the essential nature of his role. Candidates for the role of accountability partner should be upstanding, mature, and wise individuals. Staff members should not be accountability partners, since it is within the nature of their role to be called away on other church business, and the accountability role must be the singular function of the accountability partner.

- **Special Situations: Restroom Usage.** One logistical issue is navigating restroom issues. Since the accountability partner should never be out of sight of the assigned sex offender, particular care must be taken in managing restroom usage. For those facilities that have single-occupant restrooms, the partner need not be in the restroom. Standing discreetly outside and away from the restroom is sufficient. For those facilities where the restroom is designed for more than one user, the partner should be in the restroom. If the accountability partner needs to use the restroom, he or she should seek to find another accountability partner, or possibly trained church staff, to oversee the sex offender during this break. The temptation to compromise on this issue is very high, given that such a short time is involved. However, the principle of constant oversight is an important one and should be upheld at all times.

- **Special Situations: Children of the Sex Offender.** The other logistical issue occurs when the offender has children or youth in church programs designed for that age group, and a spouse (who would typically pick up and drop off the children) is unavailable. Ways to resolve this logistical challenge will vary from church to church. The church and the sex offender should discuss the best way to navigate this without compromising general standards. Notably, these standards should be applied not only on church property, but also at other church event locations, including meetings in homes, to avoid incidences of sex offenders engaged in predatory activity in private homes.

7. The standards for behavior for registered sex offenders should be set forth in writing. The offender must acknowledge the standards by signing an acknowledgement.

Your rector should meet with the registered sex offender to discuss the standards to be followed. The rector should explain the procedures carefully and thoroughly and ask the offender if there are any aspects that they do not understand. At that point, the sex offender should be given a written acknowledgement that they will be required to sign to reinforce compliance. A model acknowledgment is attached, which churches can modify according to their needs.

The rector should then ask the sex offender to read the document in the rector's presence, after which the rector should ask if there are any parts of it which the sex offender does not understand. Upon satisfaction of understanding, the sex offender should sign and date the acknowledgment. The rector should make a copy and give it to the sex offender.

The rector should record, either on the document or in a separate file, the date and length of the meeting, and indicate that the content was discussed, all questions were answered, and the sex offender orally acknowledged understanding the document before signing it.

If these policies are followed, the risk of a sexual offense at a church gathering is substantially reduced, and the sex offender can reasonably be engaged in the life of the church.

Acknowledgment That I Have Read and Understand the Recommended Policies for C4SO Congregations Considering Incorporating Registered Sex Offenders Into the Life of the Church

READ THIS DOCUMENT IN ITS ENTIRETY AND MAKE SURE THAT ALL YOUR QUESTIONS ABOUT THE CHURCH'S POLICIES REGARDING SEX OFFENDERS HAVE BEEN ANSWERED BEFORE YOU SIGN THE ACKNOWLEDGMENT.

_____ (name of church) is willing to allow registered sex offenders to participate in the life of the congregation. However, this permission may be withdrawn at any time. For those who are allowed to participate, specific behavior guidelines must be followed completely. Any violation of these guidelines will result in an immediate and permanent withdrawal of any privilege of participating in the life of the church.

As a registered sex offender, I acknowledge that:

- I will be in the presence of an accountability partner designated by the church any time I am onsite at the church or at any church event offsite.
- I will follow the instructions given to me on where to meet my accountability partner and will not deviate from those instructions without clearing it with my accountability partner.
- I will leave the church premises or any other premises where church events are held once the accountability partner has seen me to my car or the border of the property.
- If my assigned accountability partner is not available, the church will attempt to assign another one to be with me.
- If no accountability partner is available to accompany me at any church event, I will not attend that event.
- I will inform the church leadership if a law enforcement officer has made any new charges or allegations against me.
- Before attending any church event at a location where I have not previously attended a church event, I will notify my accountability partner to discuss the process by which I will meet up with that partner. I will follow that procedure at any future events at that location until instructed otherwise.
- If I am on probation, I will inform church leadership regarding any changes in the terms of my probation.
- I will avoid areas at church activities where children and youth are engaged in activities out of sight of their parents. If I have children at these events, my spouse will pick up and drop off the children or youth at these activities without me. If my spouse is not available, or if I have no spouse, I will follow the instructions given by my accountability partner to allow for pick up and drop off of my children and youth.

· I may be permitted to visit the church offices on weekdays outside the presence of an accountability partner. However, I will call the church office, and seek authorization from one of the leaders who can give such authorization, before each visit to the church offices.

Print Name: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____