

**Dominic Beer** reviews the evidence and makes recommendations for rehabilitation

# Not in my church?

## child sex offenders

### key points

The author summarises the characteristics of child sexual offenders and the legal provisions for managing them in the community.

The church can and should welcome child sexual abusers who become Christians. They should be helped to control their addiction and grow in faith, but leaders should be realistic about the difficulty offenders have changing their sexual beliefs.

Practical tips are given and in particular, a written contract should be signed to help the offender and protect the church and its children.

John is a 45 year old man recently released from prison after being convicted of a child sex offence. He says he has become a Christian in prison. Your church leader asks you to consider joining a group to help support him practically and spiritually. How can John be shown fellowship without causing uproar in the church and neighbourhood?

### Characteristics of child sex offenders<sup>1,2</sup>

- There are 28,994 registered child sex offenders in England and Wales.<sup>3</sup>
- These people have a sexual preference for children, usually of prepubertal or early pubertal age.
- Most abusers are men.
- One in sixty men in the population over the age of 40 has been convicted of a sexual offence.
- Most victims are already known to their abusers.<sup>4</sup>
- Many child sex offenders were themselves abused as children and experienced emotional problems.<sup>5</sup>
- They are often lonely people who have low self-esteem and find it hard to build adult relationships.
- Sex offending is addictive; fantasy and masturbation are frequently used; cure is unlikely so it is best to aim for control.
- Sex offenders have entrenched, distorted belief systems that allow them to think what they do is acceptable.

- They often minimise the extent of their offending or may deny it entirely.
- They may blame others – for example, their own parents, their victims’ perceived promiscuity or the behaviour of the police – to justify their actions.
- Sex offenders come from all backgrounds, classes and professions.
- Sex offenders use a process of grooming to target their victims and may work together with other sex offenders.
- Sex offenders often move around from job to job and place to place, so that their activities are not easily monitored.
- Sex offenders are known for their resistance to change. Treatment programmes may help control their activities, but changing beliefs is much harder.
- Sex offenders, especially those who have served a prison sentence, may have had a conversion experience and embraced the Christian faith. They may state wholeheartedly that they have been cured and unrealistically claim that they will never re-offend.
- Those who have embraced the Christian faith like people to believe they are nice guys and may try to impress others with the depth of their Christian commitment.

### Public protection from sex offenders

John will have been placed on the Sex Offender Register as required by the Sex Offenders Act 1997

and he will have a probation officer. Offenders who pose the highest risk (2152 in 2004) are referred to a Multi-Agency Public Protection Panel (MAPPP); their cases are regularly scrutinised by senior representatives of local police, probation, prisons, housing, health and social services. In 2004, 26 men subject to a MAPPP were charged with a further serious sexual or violent offence.<sup>6</sup>

### Sex Offender Treatment Programmes (SOTP)

John will have probably have completed a Sex Offender Treatment Programme in prison. If he has been assessed as having strong impulsive urges then he may also have agreed to take anti-libidinal medication such as cyproterone acetate. The standard treatment is cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT).

A meta-analysis of about 500 sex offenders found that CBT in groups may help reduce re-offending at twelve months.<sup>7</sup> CBT challenges cognitive distortions such as 'I am fond of children; they like me; they need to know about sex; it's part of normal growing up to learn about sex; if I don't then someone else will; it's okay to do it if the child doesn't say no'. In CBT the therapist seeks to:<sup>4</sup>

- break down the person's denial of the offence;
- develop victim empathy;
- challenge the abuser's self justification for his actions;
- address lifestyle issues and try to lower fears of adult intimacy so as to increase self-esteem;
- modify deviant sexual fantasies (these denote a poor prognosis);
- prevent relapse by helping abusers recognise situations of temptation and their concomitant moods, feelings and thoughts so they can develop preventive strategies.

### How can the church help rehabilitate child sex offenders?

Because sex offending is addictive, John will need much encouragement to motivate him in his resolve not to offend again. The Rt Rev Richard Harries wrote, 'the instinct of Christian compassion is to be generous, but this proper spirit needs to be tempered by the risk sex offenders pose and the manipulative strategies they use'.<sup>2</sup>

*The single most important factor predicting a successful outcome of treatment is the patient's motivation and willingness to enter into a therapeutic contract. Motivation is always a complex mixture of the threat of external sanction from the law, the wish not to return to prison, a wish to placate a spouse or partner, an insurance policy should re-offending occur, and a genuine wish to change, both to control the fantasies and, rarely, to relinquish the fantasies in favour of a more socially acceptable sexual structure.*<sup>8</sup>

It is important to get the balance between offering fellowship and maintaining explicit boundaries. Jesus did not condemn the woman found in adultery, but nor did he condone her behaviour. He said: 'Go now and leave your life of sin'.<sup>9</sup>

### Church leaders – what to do

- Draw up a contract between yourselves and John, which must be signed and enforced rigidly. It should address the following: John must never work with children; must never be alone with children; must sit apart from children; must stay away from areas of the building where children meet; must decline hospitality where there are children; must attend a home group where there are no children; must attend designated meetings only.<sup>10</sup> If the contract is broken, John should be banned from church and other church leaders, the probation officer and the child protection officers should then be informed. See reference one for a sample contract.
- Ensure, preferably through one nominated person, that you maintain close links with the probation officer, with MAPPP (if appropriate), and with the local child protection officers. It is best to obtain written consent from John for this interchange, but information can be shared without it. John's offending pattern, convictions, type of victim and grooming pattern all need to be known.
- Consider whether to tell the church and the reaction that may occur if you do. How to manage people's anger is important, because sex offenders are perceived as monsters. Jesus was angry at sin.<sup>11,12</sup> Christians can be angry at sin but Paul says 'in your anger do not sin'.<sup>13</sup> We should not condone sin but that does not mean that we cannot forgive.
- Provide close practical support with accommodation and employment, and pastoral care to improve self-esteem and help John understand how God views him. This might include setting up a small group to befriend and keep John accountable for his behaviour. Some find Circles of Support, a national community support system for sex offenders, very helpful.<sup>14,15</sup>
- Importantly, understand how John's faith is functioning. An immature faith can be a way of deflecting offenders from the reality of their offending. As his faith matures it can challenge him to face up to the responsibility of addressing his problems in a way that recognises the distress his actions cause.

### Conclusion

Child sexual abuse is an addiction. Treatment is rarely curative. Child sexual abusers who become Christians should be helped to control their addiction and grow in faith. Selected people in the local church should extend the hand of fellowship to offer practical and spiritual support. A written contract should be signed in order to help the offender and protect the church and its children.

*Dominic Beer is consultant psychiatrist at Oxleas NHS Foundation Trust and honorary senior lecturer at the Institute of Psychiatry in London*



### references

1. *Caring for ex-offenders: A handbook for churches*. London: Alpha International, 2004 [www.caringforexoffenders.org](http://www.caringforexoffenders.org)
2. Board of Social Responsibility of the Church of England. *Meeting the Challenge: How Churches Should Respond to Sex Offenders*. London: Church House, 1999
3. Reid J. *Home Secretary's statement to House of Commons*. 4 September, 2006 [www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200506/cmhansrd/cm060904/text/60904w2295.htm](http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200506/cmhansrd/cm060904/text/60904w2295.htm)
4. Craissati J. *Child sexual abusers. A community treatment approach*. Hove: Psychology Press, 1998
5. Craissati J et al. Characteristics of perpetrators of child sexual abuse who have been sexually victimized as children. *Sex Abuse* 2002; 14:225-239
6. [press.homeoffice.gov.uk/press-releases/Public\\_Protection\\_From\\_Dangerous?version=1](http://press.homeoffice.gov.uk/press-releases/Public_Protection_From_Dangerous?version=1)
7. Kenworthy T et al. Psychological interventions for those who have sexually offended or are at risk of offending. *Cochrane Database Systematic Review* 2004; (3):CD004858
8. Hamilton M. *Treating Sex Offenders – A Christian Perspective*. [www.ccpas.co.uk/Articles/Treating%20Sex%20Offenders.htm](http://www.ccpas.co.uk/Articles/Treating%20Sex%20Offenders.htm)
9. John 8:11
10. Churches' Child Protection Advisory Service. *Guidance to Churches – Protecting Children and Appointing Children's Workers*. PO Box 133, Swanley, Kent. BR8 7UG DVD for churches available.
11. Mark 3:5
12. John 2:14-16
13. Ephesians 4:26
14. [www.ccfj.org/what/circles.html](http://www.ccfj.org/what/circles.html)
15. [www.lucyfaithfull.co.uk](http://www.lucyfaithfull.co.uk)