

Welcome to the Hope of Christ, but Not Welcome in Church?

A recent article in Christianity Today has the following title: Sex Offenders Can Find Hope in Christ But Not Necessarily a Place at Church. The article shares anecdotal information from a variety of states and churches regarding this issue, but does not examine any of the excellent research and encouraging statistics that are available today.

The article, while mentioning that some peoples' hearts may be more honest and softer than others, does not even mention Risk, Need and Responsivity (RNR), which has extremely solid research behind it and is the preferred criminological method in today's prisons and jails. Risk means that each individual has a different level of risk to commit another offense; each also has specific criminal needs that should be addressed in treatment and supervision (need); individuals also have different levels of ability and background to support how they respond to treatment and supervision due to language skills, nationality, brain injury, general intellectual challenges, childhood trauma, early death of parents or other caregivers, religious beliefs, and so on (responsivity). There are not perfect, but excellent assessments that allow clinicians to identify risk levels for people in treatment and under supervision after a sexual offense which is a vast improvement over guessing who may re-offend. The days of "no known cure" are gone.

Interesting statistics from NARSOL (National Association for Rational Sex Offense Laws) reveal the following: 95% of sexual offenses are committed by someone who is not on a sexual offense registry; 90% of sexual assault victims knew their attacker prior to assault – Stranger Danger is largely a myth; 3.5% is the percentage of registrants who are reconvicted of a sexual offense within 3 years. The 3-year recidivism rate for all classes of crime is roughly 67%; there are 0 scientific or scholarly studies that conclusively demonstrate that sex offense registries make our communities safer; 23% of known contact sexual offenses are committed by juveniles.

Because I took issue with this article, I wrote a response to it which challenges their suggestion that the church doors ought to be closed or very carefully opened to those who have committed a sexual offense. I will be interested in hearing from those of you reading the response as to your thought

Susan's Response: Once again the Church of Jesus Christ has come out with "guns fully loaded", failing to first explore the full story. Here is some food for thought. According to the victims and their advocates, 80% of people out there committing sexual offenses have not been caught or convicted. We read about them just about every day in our local papers and hear about them almost daily on television news. They are cops, pastors, priests, uncles, fathers, teachers, coaches, judges, actors, and we could go on and on. Many of these are offending against people under the age of 18, thus those considered to be children.

Why don't we know who these people are? It is because children do not tell on people they love, at least not quickly or easily. To a child or young person under 18, losing someone they love is an unbearable thought and many teens and younger who have this experience may truly believe that they are in love with the coach or teacher who is coming on to them. Even worse, some may be offended against by their own parent(s).

Why aren't we doing more to foster prevention? Because all of our public safety money is being spent on the 20% of men and women who have been caught and convicted, who have experienced way too many years of treatment and supervision and have likewise been harassed by neighbors, kept out of good jobs, denied decent places to live, or worse, have ended up on the streets and homeless. We are likely sitting in pews or chairs at church next to significant numbers of people who have sexually offended but who have never been caught and convicted. How do we fix that?

Even the very small percentage of people diagnosed with pedophilia (under 5%) would love, in many cases, to have a chance to be treated and counselled re: their urges without the added agony of spending years in prison and on post-prison supervision for something they felt guilty about doing in the first place. In Germany, buses advertise the opportunity to receive counsel and support without involvement of law enforcement.

The sexual offense population has the lowest recidivism rate of any felony offense except murder. I suspect that the reason those who have committed murder have such a low recidivism rate is because of the many years they spend in prison. Only a small percentage of people who have committed a sexual offense go back to prison for another sexual offense. It is people with drug and alcohol, drunk driving or commission of other crimes while high or drunk – theft, burglary, larceny etc. that go back to prison where recidivism can be as high as 50 – 60 %.

Let's start worrying about pastors, priests, teachers who will never be found out, and give the men and women who have been through 15 – 20 years in prison and 5 – 10 years in treatment (more if you look at the never-ending civil commitment facilities) a chance to show they have changed. "Sexual offending" is not a disease and all people who have committed a sexual offense are not the same. You cannot put them all in one basket. Risk, Need and Responsivity (RNR), a well-researched approach to working with this group of people, talks about the different levels of risk, different levels of criminogenic need, and ability to respond to treatment present in the population of those folks who have been caught and convicted and who have experienced years of treatment and supervision. They are not all the same. Each has a different level of risk to re-offend – some have risk levels lower than that for the general public, a public that includes all of us!

I would hope and pray for a chance to do a follow up article to what you wrote in Christianity Today, that may make the picture a lot more clear, IF folks are willing to listen and learn in this particular arena. By the way, we who advocate for these men and women do not call them "sex offenders". We do, however, identify them when necessary, as persons who at one time, committed a sexual offense. It's kind of like the words of Jesus who said "Neither do I condemn you, go and sin no more". Sinners are people who are "saved by grace".