

# Recommendations Regarding Sexual Abuse in the Local Church



Cincinnati Area Baptist Association

*Presented to the Semi-Annual Meeting April 8, 2019*

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As an association, we are grieved over the recent reports of sexual abuse within our own denomination. Sexual abuse is a heinous sin, the wounds of which leave a lasting scar. God hates sexual immorality and so must we (1 Cor 6:9, 18-20). God loves and cares for the weak, vulnerable, and abused, and so must we (Isa 58:1-12; Jas 1:27). Even more grievous, though, is the fact that churches in our denomination have sought to cover up such grievous sins (Eph 5:11-12) rather than confronting the offender and seeking justice and righteousness. We cannot expect God's blessing when we hide sin rather than bringing it to light (Deut 27:19; Prov 28:13). As Russell Moore rightly pointed out, "The Judgement Seat of Christ will be far less reticent than a newspaper series to uncover what should never have been hidden."<sup>1</sup>

Though the Body of Christ has been purchased by the blood of Jesus, and we have been set free from the penalty of sin, we are not yet set free from the presence of sin and its allure (Rom 6:17-18). In our naivete, it is easy to think that such evil actions would not, or could not, or are not happening in the churches of our association. Yet Jesus, the Good Shepherd, calls us to be "wise as serpents and innocent as doves" as He sends us out among wolves (Matthew 10:16). In Psalm 23 and John 10, we are given a beautiful picture of the many things that a good shepherd does: he guards his sheep, he watches for danger, he protects his sheep, and he cares for his sheep. In His wisdom, Jesus has appointed under-shepherds to imitate Him and fulfill these functions in the local church (1 Peter 5:1-4). In light of these things, we make the following recommendations for all churches in our association:

## **1. Guard the Gate**

Just as Jesus carefully guards the gate of His sheep fold with His very life, so the leaders of the local church have the responsibility to guard the gate.<sup>2</sup> Out of a zeal to see the lost saved and believers serve, many churches have let down their guard. Sexual predators know that churches are "soft targets." For too long we have done little to hinder predators from gaining easy access to the vulnerable.

Practically, this involves being more diligent when welcoming new members into our congregations. Clearly, a church that is reaching the sinful community around them for the Lord will include those who have a checkered past (such *were* some of you – 1 Cor 6:9-11). But forgiveness for past sin does not mean the consequences of those sins are erased. A wise church

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.russellmoore.com/2019/02/10/southern-baptists-and-the-scandal-of-church-sexual-abuse/>

<sup>2</sup>We strongly recommend reading *On Guard* by Deepak Reju for a comprehensive look on how to prevent and respond to child abuse in the church

should consider screening all in-coming member candidates by searching the free local and national sex offender registries.<sup>3</sup> Inclusion of convicted sex offenders in the local body is possible only when such men and women submit to clear, written boundaries.<sup>4</sup> A refusal to submit to specific boundaries likely demonstrates a failure to truly repent of their sin (2 Cor 7:10-11) and is a major red flag given that recidivism rates among sex offenders are extremely high.

Another way in which the gate can and should be guarded is by requesting letters when a member transfers, and likewise giving honest letters when a member leaves your church. Much of the cover-up of abuse in churches happens because, rather than warning churches of potential wolves, they are quickly passed off as harmless sheep. Though the notion of letters is sadly falling out of vogue, there is biblical warrant for such actions (Positively, Rom 16:1-2 and Phil 2:18-30; Negatively, 2 Tim 2:17-19, 4:14-15), and love for one another should compel us to honesty. Again, abuse thrives in environments of secrecy and dishonesty, neither of which should be present in the local church.

Additionally, wisdom calls for careful screening of *all* volunteers who will be working with children. At a minimum, this requires running a background check prior to being allowed to interact with children and youth, and then re-screening those volunteers regularly if they continue serving. It would also be prudent to screen other ministry volunteers, such as greeters or ushers, as those individuals are quickly trusted and could take advantage of opportunities afforded by their role of guiding people around your building.

## **2. Watch for Wolves**

In addition to proactively guarding the flock, the Good Shepherd is also constantly looking for danger, watching for wolves. While guarding the gate is a means of protecting the flock from predatory wolves, what about the wolves that have snuck into the fold disguised as sheep (Matt 7:15)? The fact is that most offenders are not strangers, but rather are trusted individuals who have integrated themselves into the local body.

How can under-shepherds and their congregation watch for wolves in their midst? Practically, it begins with regular and recurrent training for all volunteers on the signs of sexual abuse. Vigilance must be a team-wide responsibility. This includes watching not only how teachers interact with children and youth, but also how the children and youth interact with each other, as children and youth whom you can't background check can still be predators; statistics say that most will first offend when they are 14 years old. There are many training options available which your church could require its volunteers to participate in. Additionally, we strongly recommend that the Cincinnati Area Baptist Association offer free training for all the pastors and ministry leaders within our association, and that our churches would avail themselves to this training, passing along the information to their volunteers.

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<sup>3</sup>National Registry: [www.nsopw.gov/core/portal.aspx](http://www.nsopw.gov/core/portal.aspx)

Ohio Registry: <http://www.icrimewatch.net/index.php?AgencyID=55149>

<sup>4</sup>See Appendix 1 for an example of a Covenant Agreement for Registered Sex Offenders, and Appendix 2 for an example of a Registered Sex Offender Policy

Second, wisdom requires that the local church establish *and adhere to* clear policies regarding how volunteers interact with children and youth;<sup>5</sup> a policy is useless if it is not maintained. What happens when a policy is violated or when suspicious activity is observed? A vigilant church which seeks to protect its vulnerable will also establish clear lines of communication so that reports of sexual abuse can be reported quickly and confidentially.

### **3. Use the Rod and Staff**

Our Good Shepherd does not guard His flock empty-handed. Rather, He always has in hand His rod and staff. These are a comfort to the sheep because the sheep know that they are safe when the shepherd is thus armed (Ps 23:4). But the same rod and staff that are a comfort to the sheep are a terror to the wolf. What happens when a wolf makes his way into the flock and the shepherd sees it? The shepherd does not try to reason with the wolf. Instead he implements swift and decisive action to remove the threat from his flock.

Practically, this means that as soon as an incident of sexual abuse is brought to light, we *must* respond immediately. First, the church has a legal responsibility to immediately contact and cooperate with law enforcement. Further, any incidents should be carefully documented to aid law enforcement in their efforts to execute justice. Attempting to cover up sexual abuse is not only illegal, it is immoral and a perversion of justice (Luke 12:2).

The only thing that covers sin, including sexual sins, is the blood of Jesus when we repent (1 John 1:5-10). Love compels us to seek that the offender repent of their sin, which requires their sin to be brought into the light, not hidden. This means that a church that cares for the well-being of its members will diligently and consistently follow the principles of Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 5. A failure to perform church discipline in a redemptive way for all unrepentant sin will foster an environment where sexual abuse can thrive. We must take seriously our responsibility to remove the leaven, lest it spread to the entire lump (1 Cor 5:6-7).

### **4. Care for the Wounded Sheep**

The Good Shepherd knows that His job is not done when He has removed the wolf from the flock, for any wolf that makes its way into the flock will injure some of the sheep and those sheep must be tended to. The Good Shepherd knows His sheep and they know His voice, and none can snatch His sheep from His hand. When a sheep is injured by a wolf, He tends to the wounds, pouring oil over them and bandaging the injuries.

In some instances, our local churches have done a disservice to the victims of sexual abuse by trying to cover it up, failing to care for them as Christ would. In other cases, the victim is viewed with suspicion, as if they were a willing partner in the sinful acts. Rather than caring for our wounded sheep, we have at times treated the wounded sheep worse than the wolves. This must not be so!

Practically, as under-shepherds, we must begin by teaching and modeling what it looks like to care for and have compassion upon those who have been victims of sexual abuse. For many of our church members, the abuse stopped years ago, but the hidden pain remains. We need to be a people who not only rejoice with those who rejoice, but who also weep with those

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<sup>5</sup>See *The Child Safeguarding Policy Guide* by Basyle Tchividjian and Shira Berkovitz for help in formulating these policies

who weep (Rom 12:15). Further, we must learn from the psalmists on how to lament the atrocities of sexual abuse, communicating this from the pulpit.<sup>6</sup>

Second, a wise church will proactively identify and equip designated advocates for those who are or become victims of sexual abuse, individuals who can quickly and compassionately respond when needed. Knowing that there are advocates may also help those who are still wounded from past abuse find the healing that the cross offers.

Third, we strongly recommend that you utilize the forthcoming curriculum that the Southern Baptist Convention is producing called *Becoming a Church that Cares Well for the Abused*. May we, both as individual churches and as a denomination, become a people who are known for our love and compassion towards victims.

We pray that as we increase our vigilance at the gate and among the flock, as we deal with sin rather than covering it up, and as we care for those who are wounded by sexual abuse, that our churches will once again become safe havens where the gospel can be heard and experienced. We pray that our churches can once again become little outposts of the Kingdom of Heaven here on earth. And we pray that the reality of sexual abuse will break our hearts and cause us to long for the day when Jesus will make all things right. And until that day, may the name of Jesus Christ be exalted in our Cincinnati area Baptist churches!

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<sup>6</sup>See *Dark Clouds, Deep Mercy* by Mark Vroegop on the topic of lament

## Appendix 1: Covenant Agreement for Registered Sex Offenders

Monterey Baptist Church affirms the dignity and worth of all persons. We are committed to being a community of faith open to those who desire worshipping with us, especially in times of serious personal trouble. However, based on your prior criminal conviction, we have concerns about your contact with children and youth in our congregation. The following guidelines are designed to reduce the risk, to both you and them, of an incident or accusation. We welcome you to our congregation and our membership, but your participation will be limited to ensure the safety of our children and youth and to assure that you will not be subject to future accusations.

Within these guidelines, the congregation welcomes your participation in any adult worship services, fellowships, committee meetings, adult education, all adult social events and well supervised intergenerational events.

You understand that you will not be allowed to volunteer or chaperone events for children and adolescents, including children's religious education classes, talks with children/adolescents during worship, youth group, children's and adolescents' activities during intergenerational events, and driving children and young people.

**Do not volunteer or agree to be involved in any events for children and youth. Remain in the presence of adults at all times when children are present.**

The following activities checked "Yes" are activities that we feel are appropriate for your participation:

- Worship Services  with Accountability Partner  without Accountability Partner
- Fellowships  with Accountability Partner  without Accountability Partner
- Adult Meetings without children in building
- Adult Meetings with children in building (example: Choir)
- Have a key to the building
- Intergenerational church activities with Accountability Partner
- Intergenerational group outings with Accountability Partner
- Alone in building with pastor or other staff person
- Access to church computer or wifi password
- Social activities in other member's homes with children present with Accountability Partner
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

\*An Accountability Partner is a person of the same sex who knows about your history/situation and has been designated by you with our approval, or by Monterey Baptist staff, to accompany you to activities where children and youth may be present. This person may not be a family member.

I accept that appropriate ministry leaders may be told of my circumstances and the limitations of this covenant.

I have reviewed this covenant and agree to abide by its provisions. I agree that if I violate this agreement in any way, I will be denied access to future church functions and church property.

I understand that this contract will be reviewed regularly, possibly as often as every six months, and will remain in effect for an indefinite period of time. Continuation of this covenant may be dependent upon my continuing participation in treatment and/or recovery program.

The individual terms of this covenant may be changed by Monterey Baptist at any time for any reason deemed appropriate by the Deacon Body.

This covenant may only be concluded by appropriate Monterey Baptist Deacon Body.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Witness \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Pastor \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Deacon \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix 2: Registered Sex Offender Policy**

The Monterey Baptist Church affirms the need of all men to come to a saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. We are committed to being a religious community open to those who are in need of worshiping with us, especially in times of serious personal troubles. However, based on your background, we have concerns about your contact with children, vulnerable adults and youth in our congregation. We are called as a church to be a shepherd of souls but we are also called to protect the flock. In recognition of the fact that sins against children are especially heinous and vile, and incur a greater judgment (see Luke 17:2), the following guidelines are designed to reduce the risk to both you, our children, vulnerable adults and our youth of an incident or accusation. We welcome you to our congregation but your participation will be limited to ensure the safety of our children, vulnerable adults and youth and to assure that you will not be subject to future accusations.

The church is a place of hospitality, we embrace the Gospel's mandate to protect, "the least of these" particularly children, vulnerable adults and teens. Each sex offender will be dealt with on an individual basis.

The Deacon Body will be responsible for the following duties.

- Determining if and when the congregation will be informed of a known sex offender in the congregation.
- The Deacon Body will initiate, implement and supervise the Covenant Agreement for Registered Sex Offenders.
- When new members join the church, they will be told about this policy and covenant.
- Safe guards will be set up for the congregation's safety.
- The Deacon Body may seek recommendations outside the church body from professional council as deemed necessary.

### **SAFE GUARDS:**

Church grounds should be monitored and patrolled by at least two members who are in good standing. These will include the following, parking lot, hallways, restrooms, classrooms, fellowship hall, youth buildings, young couples Sunday school building and doors will be locked during Children's Church.

- All employees and volunteers will have background checks. These will include the following; pastor, associate pastor, music minister, Sunday school teachers and any volunteers who work with children for any reason.
- All children activities need to be calendared so that appropriate security can be provided.
- All incidents need to be reported and actions taken to be put on file.
- All children need to be properly supervised whenever they leave the classroom or activity for any reason.
- All children need to be picked up by their parent/guardian or someone that has been properly designated by the parent/guardian.
- Registered sex offender lists are to be periodically checked for any offenders in the surrounding counties and communities.

The Deacon Body will examine each sex offender upon their record and their actions, also consulting with the law enforcement of our area and surrounding areas to see what level the sex offender is listed. This will enable the Deacon Body to decide what level of risk he or she would be and determine if the person can be allowed to participate in any way with the Monterey Baptist Church, he or she will have to sign and follow the guidelines set up by the church.