

Sex offender's request to join proves to be tempest for church

by Sandi Dolbee

Carlsbad, Calif - In the world of faith, which speaks in the language of forgiveness and deals in the currency of hope, the request would seem simple enough: An ex-con introduces himself in church and asks to become a part of the congregation.

Except when the ex-con is a registered sex offender.

The request has plunged Pilgrim United Church of Christ in Carlsbad, Calif., into the center of a gathering storm, fueled by an explosion of information about sex offenders on Web sites, fear of recidivism, and the revulsion people feel toward child molesters and rapists.

As soon as Pilgrim's dilemma became public - after a mother at the church's preschool started a protest petition - response was swift. It has been the talk of San Diego, from radio and TV shows to Internet blogs, and has drawn national attention.

The church, known for being liberal and affirming, still is debating whether to share its pews with a man convicted of molesting two boys and exposing himself to children.

One thing is clear: Pilgrim is not alone.

Marie Fortune, an expert on sexual violence, said she has heard from more and more religious groups seeking help with such situations.

"I've had this request from three congregations in the last month," said Fortune, founder and senior analyst of FaithTrust Institute in Seattle. "I think that's something that congregations need to be prepared for. All congregations."

Joan Tabachnick, a consultant who works with religious groups on child-abuse prevention, agrees.

"It's just hard for me to believe that there's not a single large congregation that's not been affected by this issue," said Tabachnick, who also is director of educational initiatives at the New England Adolescent Research Institute in Holyoke, Mass.

On Jan. 28, Mark Pliska stood in the modest sanctuary of Pilgrim United Church, with its brick walls and slender stained-glass windows, and told his story.

Pliska, 53, who was convicted in 1983 of molesting two boys in Mendocino County, Calif., and in 1998 of indecent exposure in nearby Monterey County, did not want to keep his past a secret.

"It's just a waste of time and energy to hide all the time," he said in an interview.

Pliska also was open with his previous church, First Congregational Church in Santa Cruz, which then developed a set of rules and regulations about how he would conduct himself. These included having limited access, staying away from children and being accompanied by an escort while on church grounds. Pliska attended there for about seven months and then moved to San Diego County, because he said the area had more support programs and work opportunities.

After Pliska arrived here late last year, he met with Pilgrim's minister, the Rev. Madison Shockley, and visited the church for a few Sundays. At Shockley's urging, Pliska introduced himself to the congregation on the last Sunday in January and then left so the congregation could talk about what he told them.

In the days to come, the response was emotional and divided. What Shockley was most stunned by were members who recounted having been victims of child abuse themselves.

"I am absolutely heartbroken over the pain that is felt by so many in our congregation," he wrote in a letter to members.

The minister "very reluctantly" asked Pliska not to return while Pilgrim's members try to reach a decision. Shockley also recruited north San Diego County psychologist Glenn Lipson to conduct a series of meetings for the congregation.

"I think there are a lot of strong feelings," said Lipson, who has held two sessions at Pilgrim and plans to hold two more. "One of the things that was said to me last time is that you're not only dealing with the safety of the current children, but you're dealing with the feelings of the people who have been abused."

Even among the child-abuse victims who revealed themselves at Pilgrim there is disagreement: As one struggles about whether to allow Pliska to attend, another is on the covenant team assembled to minister to him.

"I stand in a confused place," said a 44-year-old mother of an elementary-school age child. The church member, who asked not to be named, said she was raped by a great-uncle when she was 4 years old.

"I personally am not yet comfortable with having him at our church with the children present," she said of Pliska.

She wonders if the problem could be solved by adding an adults-only service, but then mentions a church hallway that has pictures of families who are members of the church. If Pliska does come to Pilgrim, that hallway should be off-limits, she said.

"I don't want him walking down that hallway," she said. "I don't want him ogling my child."

Jaime Romo, a Pilgrim member who said he was abused by a Catholic priest in Los Angeles when he was a minor, agreed to be on Pliska's covenant team as a personal favor to Shockley. The team meets weekly with Pliska to provide support and mentoring. If Pliska returns to Pilgrim, its members also may serve as escorts and help hold him accountable.

The irony of the situation isn't lost on Romo. Here is a man who eventually left one church because he was abused, only to be asked by his new church to work with an abuser. He smiles slightly and calls himself a "wounded healer."

Romo, 47, a father of three, has been open about his abuse and is a former spokesman for the local chapter of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, a national advocacy group.

He said it has taken years to get where he is, to overcome his anger and integrate his spiritual beliefs with his day-to-day life.

"I would never had done this before," Romo said. "I would have been like lots of folks and I would have

wanted to hurt this guy."

He favors allowing Pliska to worship at Pilgrim - "given appropriate boundaries and clarity about what he's authorized to do and not do."

Boundaries are big at Broadway Christian Church in Columbia, Mo., where two sex offenders attend services.

The sex offenders can't sing in the choir, be ushers or serve as worship leaders, said the Rev. Kim Ryan, Broadway's associate minister. That could put them in positions of authority, at least in the eyes of children.

Broadway also checks the names of its visitors and members against the local sex crimes registry.

Ryan believes these precautions allow the church to be open and safe.

"It was not Christlike to say you are not welcome in our church for worship," she said. "So the only way we could do it was with appropriate boundaries."

In Lutz, Fla., a minister felt so strongly about welcoming convicted sex offenders that, he said, it had cost him his church.

"Listen, if I can keep one man from molesting one child, the cost is worth it," said the Rev. Tollie Elder.

Elder said he now goes into people's homes to hold services. Included in this mobile congregation are about eight sex offenders.

"We have never had one man do anything at all that even seemed like it could be an offense," he said.

A church in Vermont, faced with a convicted sex offender who wanted to return to the congregation, embarked on a series of workshops about victims, abusers and what it means to be a church.

That was two years ago. The offender is back in the congregation as an active member, the minister said.

But not all the stories are happy ones.

A church in North Carolina also had a convicted sex offender in the congregation.

Last year, while attending a youth conference, the man allegedly molested a 13-year-old boy. A minister at the church refused to discuss the case - including who in the congregation had known of his past.

San Diego clergy who were interviewed about Pilgrim's debate said they have had little experience with this

issue. But that doesn't stop them from having opinions.

"I don't see any circumstance where we could forbid a person from coming to worship," said the Rev. Robert Ard, pastor of Christ Church of San Diego in Golden Hill and chairman of the United African American Ministerial Action Council.

Ard is adamant. "I would not pastor a group of people who had restrictions on who could worship," he said.

Bishop George McKinney of St. Stephen's Cathedral Church of God in Christ in San Diego's Valencia Park neighborhood, said he has had sex offenders in his congregation in the past, though he doesn't know whether he has any now.

"We simply believe that the church is a hospital," McKinney said."

Others are hesitant.

"You would hope that everything would all just work out fine and dandy," said the Rev. Art Lyons, a longtime leader in jail ministry and a pastor at Canyon Community Church in Chula Vista, Calif. "But I think, realistically, it's really a hard thing for people to get their emotions around, to have a convicted child molester or pedophile in a congregation where their children are around."

It also would be a troubling request for Rabbi Scott Meltzer of Ohr Shalom Synagogue near Balboa Park.

"It is one of those crimes where the numbers and the issues around rehabilitation are really abysmal and disturbing," Meltzer said.

"With a heavy heart, I don't think I would be comfortable with a registered sex offender being able to participate actively within our congregation."

About three or four months ago, a visitor at Del Cerro Baptist Church recognized a registered sex offender and told the Rev. Bob Anderson.

"I noticed he was sitting next to boys," Anderson said.

He checked the state Web site of registered sex offenders and found the man's photograph. The next time Anderson saw him, he took the man aside and told him he was welcome to worship there, but he never wanted to see him sitting with or talking to minors again.

A couple of weeks later, the sex offender returned to church and Anderson saw him walking up a stairway that also had teenagers on it. Anderson warned him again and told him the prohibition also was meant to protect him against false accusations. The man hasn't been back since.

"I would be willing to bet you there are molesters in almost every congregation," Anderson said.

Over the years, especially since the Catholic priest abuse scandal and other incidents of sex crimes in congregations, denominations have developed policies to help create safe environments for children. Many

screen staff members who work with children and hold training sessions on prevention.

The San Diego Catholic diocese requires background checks and training of all people who have regular contact with minors.

Few denominations have policies about sex offenders who want to attend services.

"There is no policy restricting the attendance of convicted sex offenders to worship services, and I am not aware of this being an issue at any parish," said Rodrigo Valdivia, chancellor of the Catholic diocese.

Soon after reading a newspaper account of Pilgrim's dilemma, the Rev. Jim Standiford, senior pastor of First United Methodist Church in Mission Valley, called the Santa Cruz, Calif., church where Pliska used to attend and asked for a copy of its policy.

Standiford doesn't know of any registered sex offenders in his church, but he wants to be prepared.

"This is a new area for many of us and, obviously, an area of great importance," Standiford said.

Stephanie Woodend, San Diego field director for Prison Fellowship, an international Christian ministry, said it is just a matter of time until a sex offender applies for a new local program her group has started to help inmates re-enter society.

"It's definitely going to be a big problem," Woodend said.

Where does she stand? "I believe everybody needs an opportunity to recover, and part of that recovery is living in the real world," Woodend said. "But I believe that the church should be smart about having safety measures in place."

The key, the experts say, is finding a balance between safety and inclusion - and incorporating that with detailed agreements and accountability procedures.

"On the one hand, you don't want to invite somebody into your fold who might be a danger to the people there," said Jill Levenson, a professor at Lynn University in Boca Raton, Fla., who has written extensively on sex-offender issues.

"On the other hand, isn't it possible that faith and healing can help many people get back on the road to recovery and maintain a non-criminal lifestyle? I don't think there's an easy answer."

Spirituality, along with housing and employment, are among the factors that usually encourage former convicts to go straight, Levenson points out.

"When you push criminals away from the kinds of institutions (that) we know are associated with moral, ethical, legal conformity, it is still unclear what the actual consequences for us will be as a society," she said.

At Pilgrim, in last Sunday's worship service, Shockley didn't mention Pliska by name. Instead, after some visitors said they had come because of the recent publicity, he alluded to it as "the matter."

But it hung in the air, like the shadow of a lingering storm. A Bible reading was about the prodigal son, who goes off and does bad things but is still welcomed by his father when he returns. The title of the sermon: "All in the Family."

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