Covenants of Care

The Church and Sex Offenders Report (2000) recommended setting up groups to manage sex offenders within the church and circuit. These arrangements may be known as a Covenant of Care. (SO69f, Part 2 Section 12 of the guidance section of CPD, and section 9 Safeguarding Children & Young People policy, Methodist Safeguarding Handbook 2010.)

Such a group may be part of the post-release from prison plans but might also be required by a Safeguarding Advisory Panel.

Key components of a Covenant of Care

- A representative of the Church should be in contact with the local risk management panel, the offender’s probation officer and the police, so that any agreement regarding involvement in the church is known and part of the multi-agency, multi-disciplinary approach to the oversight of the offender upon release from prison.
- If the group is set up as the outcome of a Safeguarding Advisory Panel decision, then discussion with key professionals in the relevant agencies should also take place.
- A small group of about five people should be set up. This should include the minister and any people who have agreed to offer pastoral support for the offender and accompany them in worship and other church activities. It is helpful for at least one member to be from outside the local church, as this helps to promote objectivity. It should also include someone with expertise or experience in this field and someone to represent the wider church community. The group should acquaint itself with any therapeutic programme the offender has undergone or will continue to be part of.
- A risk assessment should be carried out. This will involve looking at the church building and activities with a view to identifying potential risks. The offender’s probation officer or another member of the risk management panel may be willing to help with this assessment as part of their arrangements for the offender. Having identified the potential risks, the group needs to consider how they can be minimised either by a change in practice or by monitoring or restricting the offender’s creation of an agreed ‘contract’ with the offender.

Contract

The boundaries and terms of involvement in the Church should be written into a contract which clarifies the terms on which the person is involved in the life of the Church. The document needs to be signed and dated by the offender and by the church representatives. The contract should involve the person’s family and partner who may also be attending Church and need to be informed. It will need to include conditions in addition to the pastoral support arrangements. Care should be taken to ensure that the requirements relate to perceived risk in the individual case. For example:

- I will never allow myself to be in a situation where I am alone with children/young people.
- I will sit where directed in the church and will not place myself in the vicinity of children and young people.
- I will not enter certain parts of the building designated by the small group, nor any area where children’s activities are in progress.
- I will decline invitations of hospitality where there are children in the home.
- I accept that ‘x’ and ‘y’ will sit with me during church activities, accompanying me when I need to use other facilities. They will know that I am a Schedule 1 offender/registered with the police under the terms of the Sex Offenders Act.
- I accept that ‘z’ will provide me with pastoral care.
Additional issues which might need to be considered in the contract:
- Residential events, especially ‘all-age’ events.
- Events in another church or church organisation, circuit or national events. A joint agreement is often desirable in these circumstances.
- Finding another church or circuit when there are victims/survivors in the church.
- Opportunities for development of the subject’s discipleship safely and once they have demonstrated cooperation and trust with the agreement.

The Covenant of Care/Monitoring Group
- The group should meet regularly and keep a record of its meetings.
- A report should be sent to the district safeguarding officer annually or when circumstances change.
- Training and support should be provided for the group.
- The small group should continue to meet the individual from time to time to review the arrangement and address any concerns. If boundaries are not being kept, or if the contract is not being kept in other ways, it is important to address the problem (In situations where boundaries are not kept, it may be necessary to prohibit the offender from coming on the premises).
- Over time, the regularity of meetings can be reduced. The individual should never be left completely without support and monitoring. The minimum provision would be an annual, recorded discussion between the minister, safeguarding representative and the individual.
- When officers or ministers change in the church it will be important to ensure continuity of awareness and provision of pastoral support for the offender.