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BYLINE: Eilene Zimmerman

HIGHLIGHT: Christian, Muslim and Jewish congregations are struggling over whether to let sex offenders worship in their midst. Few have mercy.

Ask a Christian these days what the devil looks like and the answer you'll probably get is "child molester." One of the toughest moral dilemmas facing churches nationwide is what to do when a sex offender, released from prison and seeking a place to worship, comes knocking at the door. "We get calls every day now about this," says Greg Sporer, a born-again Christian, psychotherapist and co-founder of Keeping Kids Safe Ministries in Nashville, Tenn., a group that advises churches how to deal with offenders in their congregation. "We train about 50 churches a week," he says. "Most found out about a sex offender and have panicked." And although it's Christians who are most publicly grappling with the issue, the panic Sporer talks about would -- and has -- hit congregants in many other religions and denominations.

The rabbi of an Ohio synagogue, who asked not to be identified, reports that he has dealt with this issue twice. Rather than bring it to the congregation, the temple's executive committee made the decision about how -- and whether -- to welcome offenders to its temple. The verdict: The men could worship with them -- "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all Peoples," explained the rabbi, quoting Isaiah 56:7 -- but could not have any contact with children. Rabbi Elie Spitz of Congregation B'nai Israel in Tustin, Calif., faced the same problem many years ago, when he was rabbi of another temple. In that case, the offender, just out of prison, had molested children in a neighboring community. "I told him I wouldn't prevent him from coming to services, although I would rather he didn't. He came to worship and there were people in the congregation to whom it was so deeply upsetting to have him there, they couldn't pray. People came to me in pain over it," recalls Spitz. After that initial reaction, Spitz did some research into the nature of sex offenders and consulted a psychologist who specialized in the subject. "I wound up writing [the offender] a legal letter saying he was not welcome." Spitz is doubtful it would be different with his current congregation. "Realistically, I do think it would be a problem. A congregation is a very big family and some people are more secure in dealing with danger than others."

For Muslims, it's likely the decision would be equally vexing. Ebrahim Moosa, an associate professor of Islamic studies and director of the Center for the Study of Muslim Networks at Duke University, says that the integration of sex offenders simply is not discussed in mosque communities. But, he says, it's likely it would be difficult to allay the fears of parents. At the same time, says Moosa, in Islam there is a requirement of both justice and compassion. "In Islam, there is a doctrine that says someone who repents from their sin, it is as if they have no sin anymore. This is the tension you have with the issue. Can religious communities overcome their fear of this man's psychopathology and accept that he has paid society's penalty or does he have to suffer the consequences of his crimes forever?"

It's the same question facing a group of Protestants in Carlsbad, Calif., right now, members of the Pilgrim United Church of Christ who learned in late January that 53-year-old Mark Pliska, a convicted sex offender, wanted to worship with them. The normally progressive, welcoming congregation balked at the notion, and the resulting firestorm forced pastor Madison Shockley to tearfully ask Pliska not to come to services until the church could sort things out. (Shockley says he will announce the church's decision in mid-May.) "Nothing in my almost 30 years of ministry has prepared me to turn somebody away,"

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Shockley told the local paper. But Shockley's biggest surprise wasn't that a sex offender wanted to worship, but that so many members of his congregation had been sexually abused as children; he estimated one in four of female congregants and one in 10 men. Having an offender in the pews with them on Sunday -- even one who had served his time, registered with the authorities and voluntarily identified himself to the pastor -- was too big a hurdle for these former victims, Christians or not.

The irony is that barring sex offenders who come forward and identify themselves from attending services may not guarantee a congregation's safety, since it's likely there are child molesters in the church anyway -- they just aren't talking about it (or haven't yet been found out). When Greg Sporer was working in sex offender treatment programs in prisons throughout the 1980s, he was alarmed by the high percentage -- generally more than 50 percent -- of sex offenders in the program who had been churchgoing before they got caught. Sporer began informally surveying colleagues treating sex offenders to see what percentage of their patients had been churchgoing. He says it was always more than 60 percent.

By coming forward, Pliska, who has given interviews to the San Diego Union-Tribune, the North County Times and the New York Times, took a big risk and, so far, has lost. Not only is he still locked out of the Carlsbad church, but after a parent at Pilgrim's preschool began a petition drive objecting to his presence -- and a local news crew showed up at Pliska's home -- he was evicted. Then he lost his job as an auto mechanic. Coming forth for the safety of the community has only served to isolate Pliska, but he says he is going to stay in San Diego and won't abandon his hope of attending church. "You can't keep moving forever," he told the North County Times. "I put my faith in the Lord right now and hope things will turn around for me."

Pliska has been in counseling for years now and estimates he spent half his income in the first five years after his release in the 1980s on personal and group therapy. He became religious about six years ago. "It's been a guiding light for me," he said. "To me, I'm changed. I'm trying to become an acceptable member of society. It's an ongoing process." Pliska attended church last year at the First Congregational Church in Santa Cruz, having agreed to be escorted at all times and with no access to the education building. He moved to San Diego in December looking for work, and wanted to continue going to church. "I'm not a threat to children anymore," he said. For his part, Pilgrim's Rev. Shockley takes Pliska at his word. "He's human, just like everyone else," he says, "and he strikes me as sincere in his quest to worship with us."

Prisons have long been sites of passionate Muslim and Christian awakening and conversion. And, throughout history, houses of worship have been places of refuge and redemption; they have sheltered the disenfranchised and the discarded, from runaway slaves and political dissenters to poor immigrants, the homeless, the orphaned and the diseased. So in the case of sex offenders especially, doesn't it make more sense for religious leaders to establish protocols governing how these men can join congregations -- something Pilgrim is in the process of doing -- than to treat the offender as a pariah? I asked Jimmy Akin, director of apologetics at Catholic.com to respond. He paused before answering. "Catholics have the same human nature as everyone else, and there is a delicate balance that has to be struck between offering forgiveness and reconciliation to everyone and taking sensible precautions to protect the community," says Akin. Dennis Mikulanis, vicar for ecumenical and inter-religious affairs for the Roman Catholic Diocese of San Diego and pastor of San Rafael Church in Rancho Bernardo, Calif. -- not far from Carlsbad -- says he can't speculate on how a particular congregation would react. ("Look," he said, "the Catholic Church has obviously had its problems with sex offenders.") But Mikulanis did say he "could understand how a congregation would react" the way those at Pilgrim church have and that it's likely whatever decision they come to will be criticized. "In this society today the church can't do anything right, and people of religion can't do anything right," says Mikulanis.

The Rev. Kenneth Munson, an evangelical minister (who is also my father-in-law), holds a weekly Bible study at a halfway house in Buffalo, N.Y., for those

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recently released from prison. Munson said Christ was, indeed, a friend to those considered sinners. "Jesus said, 'A physician doesn't come to the healthy, he comes to those who are sick,' and 'I didn't come to call the righteous, but I came to call sinners to repent,'" says Munson. But he also says sex offenders aren't like other sinners because the public believes they are incurable. "To be honest," he says, "it would probably be easier for a congregation to accept a former murderer."

Britt Minshall, pastor of Cathedral Church of St. Matthew in Baltimore and a former police officer, says his racially mixed congregation includes several members who went to prison and after release came back to church, including former prostitutes, drug dealers, thieves and murderers. "We had a member who served 25 years in a federal penitentiary for conspiracy to commit murder and when he came to us he was very accepted. He worshipped here until he died. But if I brought a sex offender to worship at our church, it would be blown apart," said Minshall. "And this is probably one of the most accepting congregations in the country."

The faithful, of course, are not perfect just because they have faith. They can be hypocrites like everyone else. "We want to be like Jesus, but we know we're not there yet," explains Alan Duce, a minister and professor of pastoral ministry at Nazarene Bible College in Colorado Springs, Colo. Minshall says it doesn't help that in the last couple of years the media has whipped society into a paranoid frenzy over registered sex offenders. When a 60-year-old sex offender wanted to worship at the Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd in Reno, Nev., last month, the Rev. Rebecca Schlatter, the associate pastor at the church, said, "Clearly, we are called to love. But is it safe to love this particular person up close?" One of the congregants, Mary Carlson, the mother of an 8-year-old girl, was quoted as saying she was astonished that "this individual had already been worshipping among us and that we were unaware of it. Evil has already touched our lives." It has become so bad, says Minshall, that "There is no way for society to see these people as redeemed, the way they do other criminals. I'm certainly not defending sex offenders, but this is hysteria."

The uncharitable tenor of the sex-offender debate is disheartening to many church leaders, and goes against their scriptural beliefs and ministerial training. Sadullah Khan, imam of the 1,500-member Islamic Center of Irvine in Irvine, Calif., says, "[I believe] anyone who wants to come and worship, and whose presence in the mosque is not directly harming anyone, should be permitted to come," Khan explains. "If you had only perfect people in the mosque you wouldn't have any worshippers." The Rev. Shockley at Pilgrim said barring Pliska from their sanctuary has implications beyond its effect on the man. "We have to consider not only what it means to receive him, but what it means to send him away."

About two years ago the Rev. Steve Nickodemus of Christ Our Redeemer Lutheran Church in Sandpoint, Idaho, found himself in the same position as Shockley at Pilgrim church. A 40-year-old man who had served time for child molestation (involving a stepchild) wanted to worship at the church. "He found out from his probation officer what he would need in order to worship here and he agreed to chaperones and to attend only certain services. He's an honest man, he wrestles with feeling condemned all the time," says Nickodemus. "He said if he wasn't a Christian, he would want to leave society and isolate himself. I felt compassion for him. I think he had a real transformation in prison."

Nickodemus' congregation struggled with the issue, and some left. But others who had judged this man harshly at first later apologized to him, and these were people with young children. "They ended up asking his forgiveness, and I think we as a congregation are better for it. We have been tested many times and this time we asked ourselves: Are we going to be authentic Christians in terms of confession and forgiveness? Because this is what it means," says Nickodemus. "This is real."

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