

**Safety and Inclusion Study Group  
Report and Recommendations  
July 20, 2008**

**Introduction**

In August of 2007 the Deacon Council of Pullen Memorial Baptist Church voted to form a “Safety and Inclusion Study Group” in response to concern within the congregation about persons attending Pullen who might pose a threat to vulnerable members of the congregation such as children, youth, or those with disabilities. Such a threat might be posed by someone with a documented history of sexual misconduct, a pending allegation of such misconduct, or someone whose current conduct causes concern.

The Safety and Inclusion Study Group (SISG) was formed and charged with bringing recommendations to the Deacon Council about ways to address the presence of a sex offender within the congregation.

The study group was co-chaired by Anne Sayers and Rachel Smith. Members were: Dave Parnell, Adam Jarrell, Carolyn Billings, Sarah Oatsvall, Karey Harwood, Cindy Parkey, Nancy Petty and Jack McKinney. Rick Pearce and Lisa Graberek were original members but had to discontinue their participation due to time constraints.

The study group met from October 2007 – May 2008.

During the course of our discussion we relied on relevant research materials from a variety of sources. We are greatly indebted to the Unitarian Universalist Association for its manual, “Balancing Acts: Keeping Children Safe in Congregations” by Rev. Debra W. Haffner, and to the “Special Report on Sex Offenders” produced by the United Methodist Church. Permission to use content taken from the Balancing Acts Manual was given by Dianne Martin with the Unitarian Universalist Association.

The following report is the product of our careful consideration and contains recommendations about the policies and practices to be implemented in our congregation to reduce the possibility of sexual abuse and to assure as best we can the safety of our members. We therefore offer the following guiding principles, theological foundation and recommendations for policies and procedures to prevent and respond to congregational concerns about harmful sexual behavior.

**Guiding Principles**

- We are an open and inclusive church with a strong belief that God is a compassionate, loving and forgiving Spirit.

- We accept that God's love is always present for every person regardless of gender, race, sexual identity or personal history.
- We strive to understand and to follow the teachings of Jesus and recognize and accept that exclusion is contrary to those teachings.
- We accept that we have a shared responsibility to take intentional measures to provide a church environment which offers dignity, respect and an opportunity for spiritual healing, while also protecting the safety and well-being of all members of our community.
- Because of our commitment to provide a secure haven for our community, we believe that, as a condition of attendance, any individual whose history includes known acts of harm to others or who is at risk of such misconduct, must enter into a covenant that will help ensure an environment of mutual concern and safety.

### **Theological Foundation**

The SISG found the story of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11) to be especially meaningful for this study. The story speaks of wrong-doing, justice, forgiveness and personal responsibility. The woman who is brought to Jesus was caught in the act of adultery so her guilt was not in question. In the context of Jesus' time adultery was an affront to the patriarchal system in which a woman's sexuality belonged to her husband. Sexual sin was a serious blow to the well-being and security of the community. Adultery by a woman was a sin so great as to warrant the death penalty. In forgiving the woman and reckoning with her accusers, Jesus offers a good beginning point for considering how to be in community with those who might pose danger or risk to others.

The law was clearly on the side of punishment but Jesus makes a statement that causes her accusers to drift away: "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." At last left alone with Jesus, the woman is still guilty but no longer condemned. Jesus' final words to the woman are, "Go now and leave your life of sin."

In considering this story we were impressed with two things – that the forgiveness offered by Jesus was infused with compassion and mercy, and that the woman was commanded to change her behavior. The forgiveness offered by Jesus was an invitation into new life, a new way of being, and a new pattern of behavior. Jesus recognized that the woman before him had the capacity to live differently. For this woman, forgiveness opened the door to radical change. Thus the gift of forgiveness was accompanied by the offering of covenant. The woman was charged with changing her behavior as a way of responding to forgiveness.

However, we know that some things do not change as a result of encountering forgiveness. And with regard to the issue before us, forgiveness is not a cure for sexual offending or the temptation to offend. We also recognize that offering acceptance to someone who strikes fear or distrust in us is extremely difficult. For some (victims of

sexual abuse for example) forgiveness may seem impossible. In light of this story how do we confront these two realities?

As individuals and as a church community, we are called to follow the way of Jesus which challenges us to work toward forgiving even those who seem least worthy of it. Further, we are called to take on both the role of Jesus and the role of the woman in this story. We must learn to forgive, but we must also learn to accept the expectations that come with having done harm. As forgivers, we have a responsibility toward the forgiven to treat them as full members of our community. As the forgiven, we have a responsibility toward the forgiver to strive toward behaviors that will demonstrate that we value the covenant that comes with the gift of forgiveness.

As a church that values forgiveness and the full life that comes from both offering and accepting forgiveness, there is also a reasonable expectation that in offering forgiveness we covenant with the forgiven in a way that protects the most vulnerable members of our church community. We acknowledge that protecting members of our community from being harmed by another member must fall within the scope of offering forgiveness.

The Unitarian Universalist Fellowship document 'Balancing Acts' quotes Diane Miller's "No Tougher Issue": "In many ways, the person with a history of sex offenses has the same needs for a faith community as the rest of us. But the sex offender needs more to assure that their involvement doesn't pose risks to the congregation and that standards are in place for protection against false allegations and suspicions. Such involvement needs to include helping offenders manage their behavior and not get into situations which in the past led to offences. We must assure that the convicted sex offender does not have the opportunity within the congregation to re-offend. Offenders who truly wish to participate in the life of the church, acknowledge the extent of their crime and the difficulty their presence may cause to survivors, and who are truly committed to a new life will understand and accept the need for the imposition of restrictions."

The challenge we face as a church community is two-fold: how do we live into Jesus' example of forgiveness without compromising the safety of our members; and how do we create a place of safety without compromising our ability to forgive?

The following recommendations are made in hopes of supporting our congregation in its efforts to carry out these commitments. It is the belief of this study group that taking the actions necessary will require the establishment of a committee that will have designated responsibilities but it will also be necessary for staff and existing committees and councils to support and assist in their implementation.

### Recommendations:

1. Institute a Safe Congregation Committee, appointed by and responsible to the Deacon Council and the Pastors, which will educate the congregation about issues regarding the presence of a sex offender in the congregation, coordinate the

response to the presence of an offender, and assume responsibility for oversight of the offender's activities while at church.

2. The Safe Congregation Committee will have the following responsibilities:
  - a. Know about community resources for child abuse, treatment for sex offenders, and support groups for survivors.
  - b. Know about state laws regarding reporting.
  - c. Be a resource for people to share their concerns.
  - d. Evaluate applications for religious education teachers, and children and youth group leaders that are flagged by staff as needing more information or follow up. Facilitate annual training for staff and volunteers on issues, policies, and procedures relevant to sexual / physical abuse.
  - e. Work with the Education Council to assure that sex abuse education is offered at each age level if that Council deems it desirable.
  - f. Receive allegations of possible abuse and develop a process for handling such allegations.
  - g. Meet with accused or convicted sex offenders to develop a "Limited Access Agreement" for participation in church activities.
  - h. Create a list of referrals and resources that offer specialized services in treatment /prevention of sex abuse, and a list of support groups and counseling for survivors of childhood sex abuse.
3. Staff responsible for children and youth and the appropriate committees should decide whether child sex abuse prevention education shall be provided for parents, families, children and youth as part of our regular church education curriculum. If such education is deemed necessary, we recommend partnering with SAFECCHILD or Prevent Child Abuse NC, and using the Our Whole Lives curriculum or a similar resource. Educational programs which may be available for other vulnerable populations may be considered also.
4. Appropriate staff should continue using the guidelines developed by the Personnel Committee in 2003 for church staff and volunteers working with children, youth, and people with disabilities and ask directly about history of sexual offenses. We strongly recommend that this document be reassessed and updated with particular attention to the need to report incidents of suspected abuse to the appropriate authorities and are compatible with this report.
5. Implement the 'Code of Ethics' found in the Balancing Acts materials for all persons working with children and youth to clarify appropriate boundaries for relationships between adults and children and youth. The document will be reviewed and signed annually by each individual, and kept on file.
6. Use a "Limited Access Agreement" for convicted or accused sex offenders. This agreement is the core response of the congregation to a convicted or accused sex offender or someone whose behavior is of concern. The offender is invited to

participate in some aspects of congregational life with clear boundaries of what the individual can and cannot do. Compliance with this agreement is a necessary indication that the offender is willing to be a part of the church community. If this agreement is broken, the offender will be asked to leave the congregation and will no longer be allowed to participate in the life of the community.

7. The following procedures are to be used by the Pastors when dealing with information concerning an accusation or history of sexual misconduct:
  - a. Pastor(s) meet confidentially with the individual to discuss the history, accusation or case. This conversation is documented and kept on file.
  - b. Pastor(s) confidentially consult with an outside person who is highly qualified and trained in risk assessment to discuss the case. This conversation is documented and kept on file.
  - c. If the consultant perceives no threat, then no more action is required. If the consultant perceives threat then the Pastor(s) will meet with the individual again and notify the individual that the Safe Congregation Committee will be notified. This conversation will also be documented. When the Pastor notifies the Safe Congregation Committee, they will implement the designated procedures.
8. The Study Group's recommendations should be shared with the congregation and staff, and appropriate staff and leaders should be trained in their implementation.

The Study Group recognizes the gravity of this issue and its implications for the well-being of our congregation. The commitment to keep our members safe from sexual abuse lives in tension with the commitment to inclusion, compassion and our belief in the dignity and worth of every person. To balance our belief in God's transforming love with the harsh statistics and scientific reality of sexual predators is difficult indeed.

The Study Group found that one of the thorniest of all these issues is deciding who needs to know the information held by the Safe Congregation Committee. Clearly, key people, including the Pastors, the Ministers with Children and Youth, and the members of the Safe Congregation Committee need to know that a person with a history of sexual misconduct is attending Pullen, that he or she has agreed not to have contact with children, has signed a Limited Access Agreement and should never be alone with children and adolescents. (When appropriate the Safe Congregation Committee may consider extending the Limited Access Agreement to protect other vulnerable members of the congregation).

An argument can be made for explaining an offender's circumstances to the whole congregation in order to promote understanding and support for the individual but also to ensure that church members do not unwittingly allow children, youth or other vulnerable populations contact with the person concerned. However, this must be weighed against the crucial need for confidentiality and pastoral sensitivity...the need to know must be balanced with the danger that the offender will be demonized and that fear will overshadow forgiveness.

The Study Group feels it is enough for the congregation to know that policies have been developed to keep children safe, to know what those policies are, and who is responsible for their implementation. However, this question is important enough that it deserves consideration by the Safe Congregation Committee in order to reach a final answer.