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Such Were Some of You

What happens when a convicted child molester seeks membership in a church after serving his prison sentence? Does the congregation welcome him warmly, convinced of the possibility of redemption? Or does the moral and legal demand for protecting the life of the church, especially its children, necessarily mean that registered sex offenders be barred from membership?

That's the dilemma facing a church profiled in the *New York Times* by Neela Banerjee. Pilgrim United Church of Christ has found itself deeply divided over how to properly respond to the efforts of a convicted pedophile to join the church in Carlsbad, Calif.

In late January, Mark Pliska, 53, told the congregation here that he had been in prison for molesting children but that he sought a place to worship and liked the atmosphere at Pilgrim.

Mr. Pliska's request has plunged the close-knit congregation into a painful discussion about applying faith in a difficult real-world situation. Congregants now wonder, are all truly welcome? If they are, how do you ensure the safety of children and the healing of adult survivors of sexual abuse? Can an offender who accepts Christ truly change? [[Full Story](#)]

The prospect of Mr. Pliska's presence at Pilgrim UCC has caused concern on two fronts. Understandably, many parents are uneasy with the idea of allowing their children to socialize and roam freely on a church property shared by a convicted sex offender. But especially interesting is the reaction from a number of adult members in the congregation, themselves victims of childhood sexual abuse. For these members, the prospect of worshipping alongside a child molester is unthinkable.

While Pilgrim UCC is hardly within the spectrum of evangelicalism, the dilemma faced by the church is not one exclusive to mainline Protestantism. If they haven't already, evangelical churches will inevitably have to confront the issue as well. So what is a church to do in this situation?

For one, no church can simply "assume the best." Churches are morally and legally compromised when they fail to deliberately institute a child protection policy which attempts to mitigate the threat of abuse to its children. But churches must just as intentionally consider how they will handle those with a criminal record such as Mr. Pliska who seek membership in their church. Pretending as though a prospective member's previous criminal history has no bearing on the life and health of a church will prove fatal. Rather, a policy which outlines guidelines for accountability and supervision are imperative. This is not inhospitable or ungracious, it's biblical prudence.

But there is also the matter of how Christians who have been victims of abuse are to approach an individual such as Pliska. The pain and shame which one victimized in this manner feels is unimaginable, I'm sure. And while we should never suggest that such Christians simply "put on a happy face" and pretend as though such pain and shame are non-existent, we should be concerned about attitudes which refuse to worship alongside any Christian, regardless of their past.

Paul's admonition to the church at Corinth is instructive here:

Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God [1 Cor. 6:9-11, ESV].

As churches seek to balance the demand for prudence with a spirit of Christian charity and grace, perhaps there is nothing more important than remembering that "such were some" of us. We know the nature and power of sin in our own lives; we should do all we can to guard against its influence in our churches. Drafting and practicing thoughtful policies to guard against abuse should not be an optional exercise for churches. But we also know how rich God's forgiveness is; we've experienced it firsthand. So we can never refuse to worship alongside a repentant sinner. After all, isn't that each one of us?