

No law on church worker checks

12:15 AM PDT on Saturday, May 28, 2011

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The Press-Enterprise

Since a Temecula assistant pastor was arrested last month and charged with raping a 16-year-old choirgirl, revelations about his criminal past have raised questions about church hiring practices.

At least one church member and a victims' advocate say the pastor, who had been convicted in 2008 of sex with a 15-year-old from his previous church, should not have been allowed to work around youths.

Police have said that, as choir director at Mountain View Community Church, 26-year-old Joseph Jermaine Spencer was around up to 50 teenage girls. According to a police report, the lead pastor knew about his criminal history.

But the law does not require background checks for church employees, just those at church-run schools. And some sex offenses, such as the one on Spencer's record, don't require registration as a sex offender.

"It's like setting John Hinckley (the would-be assassin of President [Ronald Reagan](#) in 1981) free and giving him a pistol," said [David Clohessy](#), director of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, known as SNAP, a national group that helps victims of abuse by religious authority figures.

[Clohessy](#) called it "extraordinarily reckless" to put a convicted, or even a suspected, sex offender in a church leadership position.

A former member of the church who worked with Spencer as a parent volunteer said she was appalled by news of his arrest and prior conviction. She wants to know why the church leader, Pastor [John Wells](#), let Spencer work there.

"I am outraged," said Laura [Jordan](#), who attended the church with her husband and children until a few months ago.

"The fact that this pastor knew his past and he didn't let any of us know," [Jordan](#) said. "So that we can make the decision whether to put our babies around this person."

Mountain View officials declined to comment.

Spencer's lawyer could not be reached, but his mother, Margaret Spencer, has said the allegations against her son are false.

BACKGROUND CHECKS

Officials from other Inland churches say background checks have become a standard tool for weeding out applicants with criminal convictions.

John Andrews, spokesman for the [San Bernardino](#) Diocese, said anyone who works with children -- either as an employee or volunteer -- at a church in the Catholic diocese must be fingerprinted for a criminal background check. A conviction for a serious crime would rule a person out as a candidate, he said.

"A person with a sexual offense -- there's just no way," Andrews said.

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Jess Lasseigne, assistant pastor at Harvest Christian Fellowship in Riverside, said potential employees and volunteers working with children there, too, must undergo background checks.

"We're about giving people second chances and opportunities," he said. "There's a balance. You want to help people but you have to be responsible about how you help them."

The crisis in the [Roman Catholic Church](#) focused attention on sex abuse by clergy. But, while the Catholic Church in the United States now commissions an annual report of credible accusations against clergy, estimates of sexual abuse reports in Protestant churches are more difficult to come by.

In 2007, The Associated Press reported that the three companies that provide liability insurance to the majority of Protestant churches in the United States typically receive more than 260 reports each year of young people under 18 being sexually abused by clergy, church staff and volunteers.

Those three companies, at the time, insured more than 165,000 churches and worship centers out of an estimated 224,000 in the United States, the report said.

NO AUTHORITY

Mountain View Community Church identifies itself as nondenominational, but also is affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention.

A spokesman for the Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee said Convention officials have no authority over individual Southern Baptist churches, which are autonomous.

"We have no voice at all in the hiring practices of any church," Roger Oldham said.

Oldham said the Executive Committee encourages all churches to do background checks and provides information about preventing sex abuse on its website. He said individual church leadership must take measures to keep their children safe.

SNAP advocates have criticized the Southern Baptist Convention, which is the largest Protestant body in the United States, for its refusal in 2008 to create a central database to track accusations against church officials.

[Clohessy](#) said that, despite the recent surge of sexual misconduct cases by clergy, some churches still foster an environment in which sexual predators operate with impunity.

Religious beliefs about forgiveness may allow churches to downplay misconduct, he said. And church members who object to giving an accused molester a second chance sometimes face criticism.

"There's the implication because they don't want this person around then they are somehow un-Christian," he said. "Religious institutions are a terrific place to go if you happen to be a sexual predator."

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