

## Sex Offenders Are People Too!

August 1, 2009 By [Stacia Roesler](#)

*To love means loving the unlovable. To forgive means pardoning the unpardonable. Faith means believing the unbelievable. Hope means hoping when everything is hopeless.* –G.K. Chesterton

We often watch sensational news coverage of young children who have been abducted from their homes, molested, or even murdered.

There is little wonder then that learning of the presence of a sex offender in one's neighborhood or church is worrisome. Some readers of this article may have experienced abuse at the hands of just such a person. It is no surprise that anyone labeled as a sex offender is reviled and avoided like a modern-day leper.

How do we, in our meetings and in society as a whole, deal compassionately yet safely with those who have sexually abused others? As Christ ministered to lepers, are we called to minister to people who have sexually abused others? How can we be Christ's hands and feet here on Earth, loving those who are the most unlovable? For those who have been victimized, how is one to find the strength to



emulate Christ in finding forgiveness within, despite one's own injuries? Do we seek that of the Divine in everyone—including sex offenders?

To even focus on these difficult questions could be interpreted as minimizing the trauma, horror, and anger that sexual abuse brings. This leads to a further query: Can we reach a place where we are treating the offender with watchful love, while still being sensitive to the needs and feelings of survivors of abuse? Those who have suffered abuse must be treated gently and with extreme concern since the presence of any ex-offender can reignite horrific memories and feelings. While a child who has been harmed deserves justice, does an offender who has served the sentence required of him deserve a second chance at life?

U.S. Supreme Court Justice Anthony M. Kennedy said in a speech at the 2003 American Bar Association meeting:

*One day in prison is longer than almost any day you and I have had to endure. When the door is locked against the prisoner, we do not think about what is behind it. To be sure, the prisoner must be punished to vindicate the law, to acknowledge the suffering of the victim, and to deter future crimes. Still, the prisoner is a person. Still, he or she is part of the family of mankind.*

When has the offender been punished enough to satisfy us?



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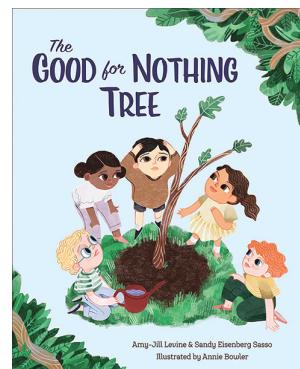
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Once the punishment determined by the state has been fulfilled, our options are to treat the released offender with love and concern—or not. Surely love and concern are not in short supply in our meetings; surely we have enough to encompass both victim and offender. How can we bridge the gap between the need for safety and seeing that of God in all, even those who have done great wrong?

Although sex offenders can be either male or female (and the incidence of female offenders is increasing annually), roughly 90 percent of offenders are males. For convenience only, this article will use male pronouns for offenders.

I am the founder and president of a prison charity, the Simple Gifts Foundation (see [www.simplegifts.us](http://www.simplegifts.us)), dedicated to helping prisoners and their families. As a result of this work, I was invited to join the Baltimore Yearly Meeting's Criminal and Restorative Justice Committee. During my tenure, the committee was asked to review the struggles of meetings that have had a sex offender introduced, and to consider the schism this situation can cause within a meeting.

I also have a personal interest in this subject: a close relative of mine molested another 13-year-old relative. As a result, I have done a lot of self-education about sex offenders—an area in which I, a middle-class professional, never had any interest in before it affected my own family. When one member of a family walks that path, the entire family is dragged right along. When a sex offender is arrested, the ripples and waves caused by his actions have very far-reaching effects, impacting all those around him (an outcome called “secondary victimization”). I personally witnessed the devastation my

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offender relative's actions wrought upon his victim and her family, as well as his marriage and his own family—particularly his children. His kids were found not to have been victims of abuse, but they suffered the loss of a parent and had total turmoil visited upon their lives. They have not been allowed to see their father for several years now.

I had significant anger towards the offender relative that I had to work through, primarily centered on my concern for his victim and for his own children. My husband and I raised his children for a period of time when they were removed from both parents' custody, although we had to hire an attorney and it cost us thousands of dollars to keep them from being placed in a foster home. The authorities assumed that I, being a very close relative of the offender, must also have aberrations, and I was placed in the odd position of having to defend my own morality. It felt like being in the McCarthy era, having to stave off veiled and spurious accusations while proving allegiance to the country.

The term *sex offender* typically brings to mind a child molester, but this term is technically applied to anyone committing any sexual offense, including indecent exposure, adult rape, peeping, and viewing child pornography. The label "violent sex offender" carries a connotation that is sometimes very misleading. This label is attached to those who use force upon their victims, but it is also applied by some states in any case where the victim is under a certain age (typically 12 to 14)—even in cases of groping and fondling, with no force and no penetration. A man who is convicted of

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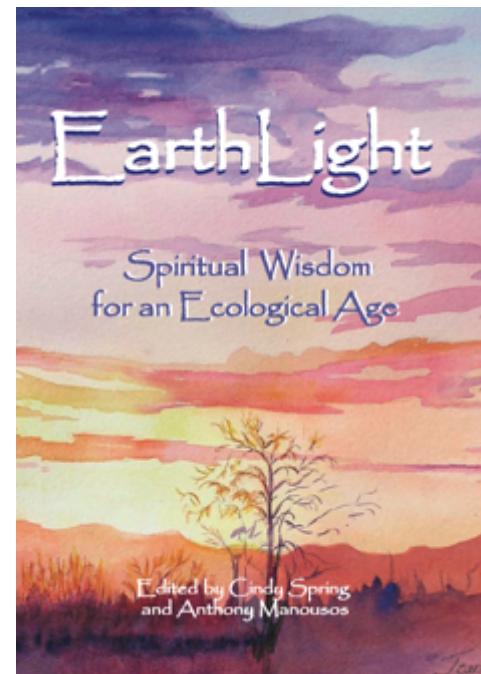
fondling a 13-year-old babysitter may very well find himself registered as a violent sexual offender. The label “predator” is attached to those who are considered by the authorities to pose the highest threat of recidivism (re-offending), based on prevailing psychological theory. But even so, the definition varies widely from state to state. Those guilty of the worst crimes—true pedophiles, for example, and also those who murder children—are not likely to receive a short enough sentence to be out on parole, or even to remain alive for long in prison.

The labels we apply to sex offenses comprise a very broad range of crimes, all of which raise strong emotions. As an example, here are the offender classifications developed by the State of California, which also have been adopted by several other states:

*High risk sex offender: an individual who has been convicted of multiple violent offenses, of which at least one offense is a violent sex crime. This individual has been identified by the California Department of Justice as having a higher risk of re-offending and therefore poses a greater danger to the public.*

*Serious sex offender: an individual who has been convicted of a felony sex offense (except those listed in the “other” category) or of misdemeanor child molestation.*

*Other sex offender: an individual has been convicted of child pornography, indecent exposure, spousal rape, incest, or*



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*misdemeanor sexual battery, or  
has been adjudicated in juvenile  
court.*

Note that what is considered to be a “violent offense” is not stipulated. On October 24, 2005, Idaho’s Sex Offender Classification Board sent this response to my request for the Idaho definition of “violent”:

*Often, the offenders who have  
been classified as being violent  
sexual predators have not  
displayed acts of physical violence.  
The Sexual Offender Classification  
Board considers sexual violence to  
be actual, attempted, or  
threatened sexual contact with a  
person who is non-consenting or  
unable to give legal consent.*

While a child who has been harmed deserves justice, does an offender who has served the sentence required of him deserve a second chance at life?

The dictionary definition of *violent* is “marked by extreme force; notably furious or vehement” (offering synonyms such as “brutal” and “savage”). This is the definition that most of us think of when we hear the word. While some offenders deserve the label, the public may be misled by the above criteria. The authorities will classify an offender as “violent” when they desire longer jail sentences and harsher parole terms. While it is indisputable that all sexual offenses cause damage to victims, making the jump to “violent” can be a word leap calculated to influence the listener emotionally. In the interest of truth, it is important to reserve the term “violent” for those who inflict injury in a forcible way.

Some states define a violent crime as any sexual assault, battery with intent to commit sexual assault, or any offense involving pornography and a minor. In Florida, even the threat of physical harm is classified as violent: the definition of a violent crime is one that “involves actual physical harm or the threat of physical harm to a person, or the crime has a reasonable probability of causing unintended physical harm or physical threat of harm to a person.” Many states use the criteria set forth by the FBI’s Uniform Crime Index defining a violent crime as any “hands-on” offense against another person, and touching a child in any manner would automatically be considered a violent offense. Thus, an offender may be classified as violent if he is a resident of one state, but nonviolent if he lives in another state; or even classified differently depending on which county he resides in, or which parole officer he draws within that county. In applying this label, there is no distinction between violent sexual acts such as rape and consensual statutory rape. In some states the term *predator* is attached to one who is deemed “likely to engage in the future in one or more sexually oriented offenses”—although how “likelihood” is determined depends on the opinion and theories of the individual psychologist assigned to the case.

What are we as Friends to conclude from this? Perhaps we should not be so hasty in judgment; perhaps we might even try to be a voice for rationality within the legal system. Those family members who defended my relative were told by authorities and therapists that they were in denial—and maybe we were, at first. Yet the legal system tends to demonize the alleged offender. Many offenders have charges piled on them in order to increase the

District Attorney's chances of obtaining a conviction or plea bargain. Authorities will record "facts" in the worst possible light, using words with negative spin. As an example, this article might be recharacterized as "defending sexually violent offenders" rather than as seeking a Christ-centered response to offenders. Some offenders are even railroaded; the authorities (with far greater resources at hand) can simply outwait a family who will ultimately run out of money and no longer be able to afford to continue the defense.

In the early 1990s, San Diego County conducted a study on the handling of sexual molestation cases, which led to a total revamping of their system. Their report to the Grand Jury read, in part:

*Child sexual molest is real, it happens, and it is terrible. Whether or not it is as prevalent and widespread as the media would have us believe is subject to considerable debate. The current trend in therapeutic treatment is to accept reports of molest as true, notwithstanding that they may be inherently incredible, made for motives of harm or gain, or the product of months or years of "therapy." The justice system, particularly the dependency process, has "bought into" this therapeutic model. The legal system's traditional truth-finding tools—witness confrontation, cross-examination, restrictions on hearsay and "expert" testimony—have been abandoned in a rush "to protect." However, when truth*

*suffers, as it has, the system fails to protect and ultimately harms the innocent child, as well as the parent.*

*In many cases, those who deny molest are guilty. However, in many other cases, those who deny are, in fact, innocent. Ironically, "denial" is taken as evidence of guilt unlike any other area of our judicial system; in Juvenile Court the alleged perpetrator of in-house molest does not have to be proven guilty in order to achieve a true finding. . . . Once the system musters sufficient cause to suspect molest, the child becomes a ward of the system and the family is forced to comply to its dictates or suffer the loss of the child. If the court believes a molest occurred and the family member could have been responsible, a "true finding" is made and wardship declared. If a father denies molest and a true finding is made, he suffers the ultimate Catch 22—he can either admit and take a chance that the department will allow him to begin reunification with his family or he can deny and no reunification will occur.*

*But the irony does not end there. If the spouse supports her husband's denial, she is "accommodating his denial." If she accommodates this denial, she cannot be trusted to protect the child and she too will not be allowed to reunify with the*

*child. Even when the mother believes the molest occurred and wants to protect the child, a current assertion is that the mother must have known all along and failed to protect. That then becomes a protective issue and reason to remove the child from the mother.*

*Still worse, if the child denies the molest, this can be seen as part of a “child abuse accommodation syndrome” and an additional reason why the child should have no contact with the parents. The child may be diagnosed as “multi-phasic” dissociative, or “in-denial” and thus unable to remember the experience. (While this does happen on occasion, the Jury has been convinced by numerous experts in this field that this is infrequent and should not be treated as the norm.) Thus, all members of the family can deny a false molest allegation and, in each instance, the system uses the denial as evidence of guilt.*

The report goes on to detail the case of one child whose father was charged with molesting her, although the father, mother, and child all consistently denied this. The authorities refused to believe the child, who said she was molested by a stranger:

In order to allow her “the freedom” to “remember” without trauma, visits with her parents were terminated until she could come up with “a more believable story.” This child was

kept in court-ordered therapy for two and a half years, twice a week, "dealing with the molest."

The Jury has heard reliable expert testimony that it is a mistake to force a child to relive and keep talking about an alleged traumatic event. Further, there is little evidence that a child will repress a traumatic event. There is good evidence that a traumatic event tends to etch itself indelibly on the mind.

The labels we apply to sex offenses comprise a very broad range of crimes, all of which raise strong emotions.

Strangely, the current legal system tends to reward those abusers who are in complete denial, who do not cooperate with the police and who take no responsibility for their crime, and punish those who admit their involvement, take responsibility, work with the police, and so forth. Many prosecutors will use the man's cooperation with the police and admission of involvement against him, since there is little probability of taking a case to trial after he has incriminated himself. He is thus forced to take whatever plea bargain the prosecutor offers. In contrast, those who refuse to cooperate and do not incriminate themselves are typically offered much better plea deals because of the difficulties inherent in conclusively proving molestation.

There are volumes upon volumes of published studies and data, some of it conflicting. One example is a widely-held belief by experts that an offender's preferred victim will mirror the age at which an offender suffered abuse; yet one study showed that 87.3 percent of offenders denied any history of such abuse (see <http://web.archive.org/web/20060818074752/http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/Lobby/6>

027/research.htm). More commonly, offenders state that they were emotionally or physically abused as children, but not sexually abused.

Prior to my own family's ordeal, I held opinions about sex offenses that are probably shared by a large percentage of the U.S. population. For example, some people may feel intolerant towards sex offenders because they believe that the offender is able to control his actions but chooses not to. This is like blaming an obese person for being fat since the impulse-control disorder can be the same root cause in both cases. Some experts believe that offenders build up to an episode through obsessive thinking—similar to eating one potato chip, then a handful, then gorging on the whole bag. Supposedly, this obsessive thinking might be triggered by just about anything: for example, watching girls' gymnastics on TV. The question, "How safe are our children if this person can't control his impulses?" may arise, but it is for this reason that reasonable safeguards must be in place while the offender is learning restraint. Many experts say that, with reinforcing therapy, offenders can learn to control their actions, but like most of us, the more stress we're placed under, the more likely we are to revert to our basic instincts. Providing a support system for an offender that lessens stress, including sympathetic mentors with whom he can be honest when undergoing stress, can be expected to actually lessen the chances of re-offending. Teaching him coping skills helps to prevent relapse. In helping the offender, we are actually helping to keep children safer.

The offender may enter our meetings in any number of ways: for example, as a returning member, through prison ministry, as a family

member, or as a seeker who just shows up one day. Suppose the offender in your midst was recently released from prison. Currently, the typical offender exits prison with between \$50 and \$200 in “gate money” (depending on the state), no job history for the past several years, one set of clothing, no car, and no place to live. The gate money has to feed, shelter, transport, and clothe him until he can get a job and start bringing in some money. He has to keep his one set of clothes clean enough to impress at a job interview. He is under severe parole restrictions, including mandated therapy for which he has to pay.

Dr. H. Clint Davis of the Correctional Education Association put it succinctly when he said:

*Can anyone get out of prison with \$50, limited skills, limited education and no hope to get anything more than a minimum wage job, and then be able to support their family, make restitution, pay court costs, and pay a monthly stipend to the parole board for the privilege of being monitored? We set them up to fail and when they recidivate, we act offended. They can't make it under these circumstances and neither could you.*

If an ex-felon has no stability, no home, and no way to support himself, do you think he is more or less likely to commit another crime? While recidivism rates among sex offenders are hotly debated among experts, the very high recidivism rates mythically quoted apply to compulsive offenders (about 40 percent of the population of all sexual abusers). Not all sex

offenders are alike; for example, males who target young boys have a higher recidivism rate than males who target girls. Generally, offenders fall into three categories: those who offend against adult females; those who molest children in their own families (inter-familial or incest offenders who do not have much interest in other victims and so have lower recidivism rates); and those whose offenses are extra-familial, including stranger offenders. Some child molesters are pedophiles; others are not. In 2003 the State of Illinois published an average recidivism rate for sexual offenders of only 3.5 percent. Dependable studies have shown overall recidivism rates of 13 percent for child molesters and 19 percent for rapists; however, compulsive offenders may have extremely high recidivism rates, thereby pushing up the average. Nonetheless, it is very rare to find any study suggesting an average recidivism rate higher than 50 percent.

Recently, multiple states have passed legislation severely restricting where offenders may live. Especially in heavily populated areas of such states, there is literally almost nowhere that an offender may legally live. While the language varies, such residency restrictions typically read to the effect that an offender cannot live within 2,000 feet (a distance that is less than one-half mile) from any school, park, daycare, or "place where children congregate." Depending on the state, this may be interpreted to include malls, movie theatres, stadiums, and libraries, and the one-half-mile limitation is not from the property's front door but one-half mile from the property line (which makes a big difference for many schools, parks and stadiums). Yet *no study* suggests that this will actually keep children safe, and in 2008 a geographic analysis was conducted in the state

of Minnesota (and published by the *Journal of Criminal Justice and Behavior*) with the following results:

*Examining the potential deterrent effects of residency restriction law in Minnesota, this study analyzed the offense patterns of every sex offender released from Minnesota correctional facilities between 1990 and 2002 who was reincarcerated for a new sex offense prior to 2006. Given that not one of the 224 sex offenses would have likely been prevented by residency restrictions, the findings from this study provides little support for the notion that such restrictions would significantly reduce sexual recidivism.*

Other studies concluded:

*Residence restrictions attempt to prevent predatory sexual recidivism, despite the fact that approximately 93 percent of all sex crimes are perpetrated by offenders known to the victim prior to the offense (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2002). The majority of sexually abused children are victimized by someone well known to them and approximately 60 percent of offenses take place in the victim's home or the home of someone they know (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1997).*

Currently, only one study (Minnesota Department of Corrections, 2007) has investigated the potential effectiveness of sexual offender residence restrictions to reduce recidivism. The authors examined the offense patterns of 224 sexual offenders released between 1990 and 2005. The results demonstrated that residence restrictions would not have prevented any re-offenses. Of the 224 offenders, only 27 (12 percent) established contact with their victim(s) within one mile of the offenders' home and not one established contact near a school, park, or playground.

The Colorado Department of Public Safety (2004) used mapping software to examine the residential proximity to school and daycare centers of 13 sexual offenders who sexually recidivated in a study of 130 sexual offenders over a 15-month follow-up period (15 offenses by 13 offenders). The results demonstrated that recidivists were randomly located and were not significantly more likely than non-recidivists to live within 1,000 feet of a school or daycare.

Such residency laws, which remove the discretion that is appropriate for a parole officer to wield when considering the offender's living arrangements, stemmed from Internet registries enabling parents to become more aware of sex offenders living in close proximity. The laws are nonsensical: note that the sex offender may, for example, live in an apartment complex that is teeming with children, as long as it is not within the legislated distance. Many halfway houses, established for the purpose of assisting felon reentry, suddenly found themselves inside the magical radius and therefore no longer able to shelter paroling offenders. Such laws turn sex offenders into societal pariahs, lending a false sense of

security to those who seem not to realize that even if an offender lives outside these limitations a) sex offenders have cars (and feet) and b) this protects children only from known offenders.

It is worth considering that while a released offender in the midst of the meeting bears watching, there may be *more* to fear from an *undiscovered* offender in our midst—a greater danger because this person is as yet unknown, can continue to operate in secrecy, and will not be identified even via a background screening process (which would still identify an offender who has served his full sentence and has no parole restrictions). If a released offender comes into our midst with humility and repentance, boundaries and safeguards can be put into place. Not so with the unknown offender, who is free to prey at will. (Recidivists who have been in prison multiple times for the same offense probably need more help than we can provide, and they present an increased risk.) Keep in mind that if he is an inter-familial offender, he most likely presents little risk to anyone outside his family. If on parole, the released offender will also have strict parole obligations with which he must comply, one of these usually being no contact with minors. This means that although the ex-offender may see children in a public venue (for example, at church or the grocery store), he must in no way communicate with them, and if he accidentally does (i.e. the child independently approaches him), he must immediately report the interaction to his parole officer. An ex-offender who is not carefully following this rule should rightly be subject to intense scrutiny by the meeting. Also, the meeting should meet with the offender's parole officer to understand fully the terms of

the parole. If the offender is considered a predator, the meeting should be made aware of this.

Yet there must be concern not just for the offender, but for those who may feel threatened by his presence at the meeting: e.g. parents, the children of the meeting, and adults who have experienced victimization, which may be unrevealed. (The rules of parole would typically forbid the offender from any contact with the crime victim.) However, the presence of an offender can offer a potential opportunity of healing for victims of other abuse who may not be able to enter into dialogue with their own victimizer, yet with time and work might receive healing if the offender were open to listening to the fears of the community. There are, however, some past victims who simply don't feel comfortable with any offender in the meeting, and this is a very difficult situation to arbitrate. The ideal would be to achieve a middle ground where all people can be nurtured—offenders too, but under the watchful supervision of other adults.

Christ said, "Judge not lest ye be judged," but he also said, "Be ye wise as serpents." While it is prudent for a meeting to always have at least two adults present in any interactions with children (protecting the children from harm as well as the adults from any suspicion or false accusations), it is especially important that an ex-offender never be alone with either children or victimized women; studies have found that victim selection is primarily based upon accessibility and vulnerability. One meeting reports that assigning an adult "shadow," "mentor," or "buddy" to the ex-offender can increase the comfort level of the other attenders. Others have suggested involving

qualified counselors. In some ways, it takes a village to rehabilitate an offender because he must submit to being accountable to the entire meeting. Neither the offender nor his mentors or other supporters should be allowed to minimize his crime or make excuses for him.

The Center for Sex Offender Management ([www.csom.org](http://www.csom.org)) advises:

*Jurisdictions across the country that apply a multidisciplinary model of sex offender management are learning that no single entity can prevent sexual assault alone. Only through the use of collaborative approaches can those responsible for sex offender management contain these offenders and minimize the risk of future sexual victimization.*

It is also extremely important to remember that offenders—both discovered and undiscovered—can be very crafty and manipulative in achieving their goals. As one study points out, “The general sex offender is not an aggressive and violent person who lashes out at his victims; instead, he is a sneaky and manipulative predator who extracts sexual gratification out of young people who trust him.” A meeting with one or more attending ex-offenders should offer training in identifying and deflecting manipulative tactics. Further, since offenders thrive on secrecy, all members—especially the children—should understand the value of speaking up and be warned of the dangers inherent in maintaining secrets. Such openness will help the parole officer and therapist to adjust the offender’s treatment. At the same time, accusations should never be

made lightly, since even spurious suspicions can have devastating consequences.

Offenders know that suspicion of them is heightened, and they fear false accusations that can lead to their re-imprisonment. I know this not only because the published literature supports it, but also because my work with the Simple Gifts Foundation puts me in contact with many sex offenders and I have discussed these issues with them. One sign of a released offender who is truly trying to go straight is that he will assiduously avoid children or any circumstance that could lead to misinterpretation, because such situations are inherently dangerous to his freedom. The meeting must remember that parolees can be re-imprisoned for relatively small infractions, let alone a significant accusation, and therefore take precautions to help the offender maintain necessary boundaries.

Offenders, like everyone else, need a haven of trust in order to feel safe. In order to divulge their behavior to the meeting, they must feel reasonably safe in doing so. Released offenders fear not just the loss of others' goodwill and friendship, but also persecution and actual physical retaliation from vigilantes—with good reason, since they are frequently subject to such vendettas. One may feel pity for such a person, even though his crime was awful and the responsibility for being in such a predicament rests solely with him. It is extremely hard for a sex offender to get a job and find a place to live, and many offenders experience neighbors who post "crime flyers" about them at their home and workplace or threaten the offender with physical violence.

While this article has focused on how we might best handle offenders present in meetings, perhaps we ought to consider as well how we as Quakers ought to treat offenders in the rest of the world. There may be one living near you, in fear and self-loathing, who needs someone to reach out; who, if ministered to, loved, and mentored, might not re-offend—and more importantly, might come to know God's love. Some Quakers may believe that this issue is of no import to them since they have no children attending their meeting. If your meeting has no children, then it may be a "perfect garden" for mentoring ex-offenders and helping them establish re-entry to society.

If any one of us had to stand before the congregation and be judged on the single most heinous deed of our lives, how would we fare? Condemn me at once, because there are things in my life I've done of which I am not proud—and for which I throw myself on the mercy of the living God for forgiveness. The offenders in our midst are being publicly judged by the worst act of their lives, and they are throwing themselves on our fallible human mercy. In response, let us be dispersers of love, not judgment—while exercising due caution.

*"I desire mercy, not sacrifice. For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."*  
—Matt. 9:13

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## Stacia Roesler

Stacia Roesler, a contract manager for a large firm, is an occasional attender of Woodlawn Meeting in Alexandria, Va., where her husband is a member.

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