

# MINISTERING TO ADULT SEX OFFENDERS: TEN LESSONS FROM HENRY GERECKE

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He who covers up his faults will not succeed;  
He who confesses and gives them up will find mercy.

*Proverbs 28:13*

## Introduction

Henry Gerecke grew up in rural Missouri where first and second generation immigrants “farmed the land and worshipped God in the Missouri Synod Lutheran tradition.”<sup>2</sup> Gerecke himself became a Lutheran Church Missouri Synod pastor, serving in that role from 1925 until his death in 1961. Gerecke was a faithful minister noted for his desire to minister to “people he felt more desperately in need of hearing the Gospel message.”<sup>3</sup> This led him to “follow a call” to minister to his community’s downtrodden and forgotten—the poor, the elderly, the mentally ill, and criminals.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps it was his heart for the suffering that led Gerecke, at nearly 50 years of age, to enlist as a chaplain in the United States Army during World War II. After several years of service and sacrifice, including a prolonged separation from his wife,<sup>5</sup> Gerecke was asked to perform “one of the most singular [acts of ministry] ever

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<sup>2</sup>Lyle Dorsett, “Would You Share the Gospel with Hitler’s Worst Henchmen?” *Christianity Today*, May 23, 2014, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2014/may-web-only/would-you-share-gospel-with-hitlers-worst-henchmen.html>, accessed February 6, 2015.

<sup>3</sup>Tim Townsend, *Mission at Nuremberg: An American Army Chaplain and the Trial of the Nazis* (New York: William Morrow, 2014), 20.

<sup>4</sup>Townsend, 20.

<sup>5</sup>Gerecke served as a chaplain from August of 1943 to May of 1945 when Germany surrendered. He ministered to soldiers in England and also to soldiers following the Normandy invasion. In addition to ministering in hospitals, Gerecke served soldiers on the frontlines. Lyle Dorsett, “Would You Share the Gospel with Hitler’s Worst Henchmen?”

undertaken by U.S. Army chaplains.”<sup>6</sup> The farm boy from Missouri was asked to minister to Nazi war criminals responsible for murdering millions of men, women, and children.<sup>7</sup> The war criminals in Nuremberg had “spit on the notion of traditional Christianity [and] had broken a covenant with God, set down in the ten commandments [sic] . . . .”<sup>8</sup> These were the criminals the army assigned to Gerecke, in an “historic experiment in how good confronts evil.”<sup>9</sup>

Although Gerecke considered it his Christian duty to save the souls of these men before their execution, he was not naïve in performing this function. When ministering to the Nazis, Gerecke took great pains to avoid being manipulated by master liars whose evil will shock the conscience until the end of time. Gerecke had little interest in according these men what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “cheap grace.”<sup>10</sup> According to Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran minister executed by the Nazis because of his opposition to the government, cheap grace was “grace sold on the market like cheapjacks’ wares. The sacraments, the forgiveness of sin, and the consolation of religion are thrown away at cut prices.”<sup>11</sup> In contrast, Bonhoeffer said a Christian should seek “costly grace” which “comes as a word of forgiveness to the broken spirit and the contrite heart” and that “compels a man to submit to the yoke of Christ and follow him.”<sup>12</sup> In keeping with Bonhoeffer’s concept of costly grace, Gerecke was determined to aid as many Nazis as possible in understanding the concept of genuine repentance.

Although most clergy will never be tasked with ministering to war criminals, many are tasked with the responsibility of ministering to those who have committed unspeakable crimes. Nowhere is this more important than in ministering to men and women who have sexually violated boys and girls.

In the quarter of a century I have been a child protection professional, Christian clergy have often asked my thoughts on ministering to child molesters—adults who have violated their own children and the children of others. In some cases, sex offenders have violated hun-

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<sup>6</sup>Townsend, *Mission at Nuremberg*, 7.

<sup>7</sup>The number provided in the Nuremberg war crimes indictment was 5.7 million murders. William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959), 978.

<sup>8</sup>Townsend, 11.

<sup>9</sup>Townsend, 7.

<sup>10</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan, 1959), 43.

<sup>11</sup>Bonhoeffer, 43.

<sup>12</sup>Bonhoeffer, 45.

dreds of children<sup>13</sup> causing a lifetime of medical, mental health, and spiritual damage.<sup>14</sup> Equally troubling, many sex offenders violate children in the name of God, twisting Scripture in any way possible to manipulate the child and protect themselves.<sup>15</sup>

### **A case study**

As a case in point, consider this example of a Protestant minister who sexually abused his daughter, a child still in kindergarten. When the girl questioned the morality of the sexual abuse, even suggesting her father's conduct was sinful, the father retorted that there are exceptions to the rule against incest. The minister reiterated the creation account in Genesis as well as the history of the great flood and noted that when the only inhabitants of this troubled planet were Adam and Eve or Noah and his family, God used sexual abuse to populate the earth. The minister told his daughter that God appeared to him in a dream, and informed him this was one of those exceptional times. According to this clergyman, his sexual touching of his daughter was directly commanded by our Lord.<sup>16</sup>

If you are a minister of the Gospel, and you are called to the prison cell where the man in this scenario is wallowing alone in the aftermath of his sins, how would you minister to him? In answering this question, a Christian pastor may benefit from a study of Henry Gerecke's ministry to war criminals. Although the evil of the leaders of the Third Reich seems in a class by itself, Gerecke's ministry to these men is a theologically sound approach to use with adults who have committed crimes against children.

### **A caution about applying these guidelines to children who commit sexual offenses**

Prior to discussing what this paper is about, we need to make clear what this paper is not about. We are not in these pages focused on sexual offenses committed by adolescents and teenagers. Although as

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<sup>13</sup>Gene Abel et al., "Self-reported Sex Crimes of Non-incarcerated Paraphiliacs," *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 2 (1987): 3-25.

<sup>14</sup>Vincent J. Felitti and Robert F. Anda, "The Relationship of Adverse Childhood Experiences to Adult Medical Disease, Psychiatric Disorders and Sexual Behavior: Implications for Healthcare," in Ruthe A. Lanius et al., eds, *The Impact of Early Life Trauma on Health and Disease: The Hidden Epidemic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 77-78.

<sup>15</sup>Victor I. Vieth, "What Would Walther Do? Applying Law & Gospel to Victims and Perpetrators of Child Sexual Abuse," *Journal of Psychology & Theology*, 40, no. 4 (2012): 257, 270-271.

<sup>16</sup>This is a case the author is familiar with.

many as one-third of all sexual offenses are committed by children,<sup>17</sup> youth often sexually violate other youth for very different reasons than adults.<sup>18</sup> Ministers working with children committing sexual offenses must take pains to learn the nuances involved with juvenile offenders and work in tandem with qualified medical, mental health, and social service or criminal justice professionals. Rather than Henry Gerecke's work with war criminals, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's work with delinquent and other struggling youth would be a better model for pastors to follow when working with most adolescent sex offenders.<sup>19</sup>

### **Ministering to adult sex offenders: lessons from Henry Gerecke**

Rather than juvenile offenders, this paper is focused on ministering to adult sex offenders—men and women who have, in many instances, violated multiple children in order to fulfill their own sexual or other carnal desires. How and why adults molest children is a complex topic and, once again, pastors are advised to work with sex offender treatment providers and other experts in ministering to this population. Within this broader context, though, there are general guidelines pastors should adhere to—guidelines that can be drawn directly from the ministry of Henry Gerecke at Nuremberg.

#### **Lesson #1: Assess your own abilities for ministry of this kind**

When asked to provide spiritual care for the Nazi war criminals, Pastor Gerecke took time to assess his own abilities and feelings, to search the Scriptures, and to “pray harder than he ever had in his life.”<sup>20</sup> One scholar describes the process this way:

Gerecke was badly shaken [by the request to minister to the Nazis] and asked [the Army] if he could think it over. He was ter-

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<sup>17</sup>David Finkelhor et al., *Juveniles who Commit Sex Offenses Against Minors*, OJJDP Juvenile Justice Bulletin (December 2009).

<sup>18</sup>According to the Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers:

Adolescent sexually abusive behavior is influenced by a variety of risk and protective factors occurring at the individual youth, family, peer, school, neighborhood and community levels. Consequently, policies and practices should include evaluations that consider a range of potentially relevant factors that might be related to the development or possibility of repeated sexually abusive behavior in a given youth and that can guide effective intervention.

“Adolescents Who Have Engaged in Sexually Abusive Behavior: Effective Policies and Practices,” adopted by the ATSA Executive Board of Directors on October 30, 2012.

<sup>19</sup>See Andrew Root, *Bonhoeffer as Youth Worker: A Theological Vision for Discipleship and Life Together* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014).

<sup>20</sup>Townsend, *Mission at Nuremberg*, 104-105.

rified by the prospect of being close to the men who had tried to take over the world. Would he have to shake their hands? He imagined that simply feeling their breath on his face would be sickening.<sup>21</sup>

In the same way Gerecke struggled with the very notion of ministering to mass murderers, clergy often struggle with the concept of ministering to adults sexually aroused by children, particularly when these offenders have acted on these sinful desires. The brief synopsis, presented earlier in this paper, of a father sexually abusing his daughter by convincing her that the abuse was ordained by God is a foretaste of the unseemliness of working with a child molester.

In learning details about an offender's history of sexually abusing one or more children, the pastor may be repulsed to the point where he cannot effectively minister to the offender. This may be particularly true if the pastor is himself a victim of child abuse or has a close family member or friend impacted by this sin.<sup>22</sup> It is not a sign of weakness to conclude you are not ideally suited to minister to a particular offender—it is simply recognizing your own limitations and the need to find the clergy best equipped to work with this population.

It is critical to remember that counseling an offender is not a quick fix in which a pastor offers a prayer and a Bible lesson or two, and then urges the offender to come to church.<sup>23</sup> Spiritually counseling an offender is often a long process requiring the pastor to descend into the darkest of valleys. Accordingly, it is essential for the pastor to make sure he is fully prepared for this battle physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

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<sup>21</sup>Townsend, *Mission at Nuremberg*, 104.

<sup>22</sup>Although false allegations of abuse are rare, in the unlikely an event a pastor has been falsely accused of abuse or is close to someone who has been falsely accused, he may also not be ideal for working with an actual sex offender. In this scenario, the pastor may be vulnerable to accepting the offender's denial or minimization without fully considering the evidence. For an overview of the research on false accusations of abuse, see John E.B. Myers, *Myers on Evidence of Interpersonal Violence*, fifth edition (New York: Aspen Publishers, 2011), 474-478.

<sup>23</sup>Indeed, some sex offenders may never be "cured" in the sense they can be completely rid of sexual thoughts about children or other victims. According to Dr. James Cantor, Associate Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Toronto, "The best treatments we have available for pedophiles help them develop the skills they need to live a healthy, offense-free life and, in some cases, to block their sex drives (if they feel it would help them). We have not yet found a way to convert pedophiles into non-pedophiles . . ." Alice Dreger, "What Can Be Done About Pedophilia?" *The Atlantic*, August 23, 2013, <http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2013/08/what-can-be-done-about-pedophilia/279024/>, accessed March 1, 2015.

## Lesson #2: Keep in the forefront of your mind the victims of the offender

Pastor Gerecke understood that if he was going to help the Nazi war criminals, he must fully understand the enormity of their evil. In the case of Gerecke, this meant visiting the sites of the Nazi cruelties and murders. One biographer describes Gerecke's visits in this way:

Gerecke returned several times to Dachau. He never said what compelled him, nor whether his description of touching its walls as blood smeared his hands was literal or metaphorical. Whatever happened in his mind as he walked through the camp remained there for good. [As he stood] next to the ovens on that first visit, Gerecke said in a soft voice 'How could they do something like this?' He said it over and over again.<sup>24</sup>

In more fully understanding the enormous suffering of the victims of the Holocaust, Gerecke was better positioned to convey this suffering to the killers, to work to instill genuine empathy and remorse, and to make it more difficult for the prisoners at Nuremberg to lessen their responsibility for their acts of terror.

In the same way, a pastor should seek to understand the suffering of the victim or victims of a sex offender. The victim may have communicated her pain through court testimony, victim impact statements to a judge, or comments to the media. Even if a pastor cannot obtain information about the suffering of a particular victim, he can obtain a general knowledge of the suffering of child abuse victims and, when working with an offender, bring home this pain to a molester unwilling to acknowledge the likely impact of his offense on the child.

This can be as simple as asking obvious questions:

- How do you think the victim felt? Do you think she felt betrayed? Do you think it was hard for her to go to school, to mask her feelings?
- Was the victim bleeding, crying or otherwise displaying physical or emotional pain? Why didn't you obtain a doctor or a counselor for her?

A pastor may wish to assign to the offender a reading of the Gospel of Luke—a Gospel that theologians have noted for its focus on the love of Jesus for “the lowly, the despised, and the outcast from society.”<sup>25</sup> The Gospel of Luke also paints a moving portrait of Christ's love for children—and a harsh rebuke to anyone who would harm them.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Townsend, *Mission at Nuremberg*, 94-95.

<sup>25</sup>Mark J. Lenz, *Four Portraits of the One Savior* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2012), 57.

<sup>26</sup>Luke 18:15-17, 17:2.

These lessons from Luke may invite a conversation for a godly view of victims, particularly children. As we will discuss, the Gospel of Luke also contains perhaps the clearest example of a criminal responding appropriately to his or her crimes.

### **Lesson #3: Closely review the evidence in order to lessen the possibility of being manipulated**

To the Nazis, propaganda was a code word for lying—and the capacity of their war machine to manipulate the clearest of facts to their own ends was a stunning display of audacious vulgarity. To work with men of this ilk, Henry Gerecke took great pains to understand the evidence against them. This included attending the war crimes trial on a daily basis in order to maintain his balance in speaking with the defendants.<sup>27</sup>

Men and women who sexually abuse children are also master liars who manipulate not only their victims, but also parents, churches, and communities into believing their crimes are not particularly egregious or are even the fault of the victim. Sex offender treatment provider Anna Salter explains offenders' skills at deception this way:

Very few of us have ever been suspected of a crime, and fewer still have been interviewed by the police about one. Under such circumstances, detection apprehension would be very high for most of us . . . But that would change had we practiced lying over serious matters every day, had we lived a double life, had we been questioned by upset parents or by police numerous times in the past. You are never going to run into a child molester who is not a practiced liar, even if he is not a natural one.<sup>28</sup>

When it comes to manipulating pastors and others in the faith community, sex offenders often find Christians to be easy prey. According to one convicted child molester:

I consider church people easy to fool . . . they have a trust that comes from being Christians . . . They tend to be better folks all around. And they seem to want to believe in the good that exists in all people . . . I think they want to believe in people. And because of that, you can easily convince, with or without convincing words.<sup>29</sup>

With manipulation at this level, pastors are well advised to follow the example of Gerecke in closely examining available evidence. If the parishioner is standing trial, a pastor may want to watch the proceedings. If the trial has already taken place, the clergy may want

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<sup>27</sup>Townsend, *Mission at Nuremberg*, 164-165.

<sup>28</sup>Townsend, 203.

<sup>29</sup>Townsend, 29.

to review a transcript. At the very least, review the criminal complaint and any public documents that may have been filed with a court administrator.

Some years ago, I took a phone call from a Protestant minister working with a convicted sex offender. The offender was in prison for sexually abusing a boy but had done some work for the church as part of a prison release program. In speaking to the pastor about joining the congregation upon his release, the offender said he had only abused one child one time and, upon being caught, promptly pled guilty as a sign of repentance.

I told the pastor I have never met an offender who simply pled guilty without any consultation with an attorney or an attempt at striking some sort of bargain with the prosecutor and suggested he check the original court records. A few days later, the pastor called to tell me the man was charged with sexually abusing 8 boys, had confessed to the police his molestation of all these children and, as part of a plea agreement, pled to violating one child and received a reduced prison sentence.

Clearly, this offender had not been honest with his pastor and if the clergy had not attempted to verify the actual facts, the pastor and the church would have been manipulated into concluding the offender was a lower risk than he really was. Moreover, allowing the offender to lie in this way does him no good. Change is always possible—but it begins with brutal honesty about our sins.

#### **Lesson #4: Stay within your field of expertise**

There were a number of reasons the United States Army wanted Gerecke to minister to the Nazi war criminals—and not all of these reasons were benevolent. Since the Nazis were on trial for crimes against humanity, the army wanted to make sure it adhered rigidly to the Geneva Convention and this meant providing a chaplain for the prisoners.<sup>30</sup>

There was, though, a less noble incentive—the army wanted to keep the prisoners alive long enough so they could hang them.<sup>31</sup> To this end, the army assigned a mental health team to monitor the level of depression among the prisoners.<sup>32</sup> Although Gerecke worked in tandem with this team,<sup>33</sup> even rooming with the army psychol-

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<sup>30</sup>Townsend, *Mission at Nuremberg*, 117.

<sup>31</sup>Townsend, 118-123.

<sup>32</sup>Townsend, 123,209.

<sup>33</sup>Indeed, Gerecke had previously worked in tandem with mental health professionals including ministering to soldiers hospitalized in a neurological center who were suffering from the “psychological horrors of war.” Townsend, 72.



ogist,<sup>34</sup> he stayed within his field of expertise of administering law and gospel and otherwise working to address the spiritual needs of the criminals.

Gerecke's conduct is sage advice for pastors working with child molesters. The mind of a sex offender can be exceedingly complex and their motivation for offending hard to discern.<sup>35</sup> Even seasoned sex offender treatment providers err in assessing or treating molesters.<sup>36</sup> If this is true, then certainly a pastor with less training and experience can also make grievous errors in working with this population.

In one case, a pastor advised me that a child molester he was counseling was not a pedophile since he "only" had two victims and the offenses occurred many years ago. It had never occurred to this pastor that the offender may have had other victims for which he was never caught. In rendering a diagnosis of whether or not the offender was a pedophile, the pastor was also demonstrating an ignorance of the very term he was using. According to the DSM-5, a pedophile is someone with intense, recurring sexual thoughts about pre-adolescent children.<sup>37</sup> Accordingly, someone could be a pedophile even if they had not acted on these desires or thoughts.

To avoid these pitfalls, a pastor should refrain from diagnosing an offender, assessing their risk, or otherwise making treatment recommendations. Instead, a pastor should work with the offender's treatment provider, probation officer, and other professionals and utilize their expertise in assessing an offender's risk or the intensity of the treatment needed. Working with these professionals, the pastor and congregation as a whole can develop safety and other plans for an offender who is part of a church.<sup>38</sup>

When a pastor strays outside his area of expertise, the advantage swings markedly in the direction of an offender seeking to manipulate the clergy or the church. When, though, a pastor works with other professionals and focuses on his primary area of expertise in addressing the spiritual needs of the offender, a successful outcome becomes possible.

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<sup>34</sup>Townsend, *Mission at Nuremberg*, 123.

<sup>35</sup>See Anna Salter, *Predators, Pedophiles, Rapists and Other Sex Offenders* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), Vera Sigre-Leiros et al., "Cognitive Schemas and Sexual Offending: Differences between Rapists, Pedophilic and Non-pedophilic Child Molesters, and Sexual Offenders," *Child Abuse & Neglect* 40 (2015): 81.

<sup>36</sup>Salter, 21-22.

<sup>37</sup>American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, fifth edition (Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association, 2013), 697-698.

<sup>38</sup>Victor I. Vieth, "Suffer the Children: Developing Effective Church Policies on Child Maltreatment," *Jacob's Hope* 2, no. 1 (2011): 1-8.

## Lesson #5: Don't go it alone: compare notes with other pastors and professionals

In addition to cooperating with mental health and other professionals working with the prisoners at Nuremberg, Gerecke developed a working relationship with Sixtus "Richard" O'Conner, a Catholic chaplain who ministered to a number of the prisoners.<sup>39</sup> Although Gerecke and O'Conner differed theologically, they had a shared objective at Nuremberg in which they were "trying to lead those Nazis who were willing to follow toward a deeper insight into what they had done."<sup>40</sup>

In shining a light on the brutality of the Nuremberg prisoners, Gerecke was following a well-established Lutheran pattern for ministering to unrepentant sinners. C. F. W. Walther, the first president of the Missouri Synod, believed the "preaching of the Law is the *cause* of contrition" (emphasis added).<sup>41</sup> In focusing first on the evil of these men, Gerecke was preparing their heart for the Gospel.

In the same way it was difficult to assist mass murderers in gaining a "deeper insight into what they had done" it can be challenging to minister to sex offenders who continue to minimize or cloud their conduct in cognitive distortions that keep them locked in their sins. When this is the case, a pastor is wise to consult with or otherwise compare notes with other clergy or professionals who can assist in responding to the theological challenges.

In one instance, for example, a pastor was frustrated by his ministering to a fellow clergyman imprisoned for sexually abusing children in his congregation. Although the convicted sex offender acknowledged his sin, he also continued to blame his conduct on the "sins" of others. For example, the imprisoned minister contended his wife withheld herself from him sexually and this contributed to his temptation to molest children. Unable to get through to the offender that God would hold him solely responsible for his crimes, the counseling minister reached out to other clergy to assist in finding new avenues to reach into the heart of this molester.<sup>42</sup>

Our Lord found it beneficial to send his disciples in teams of two to minister to the world,<sup>43</sup> and following a similar path may be particularly beneficial when ministering to a sex offender unwilling to fully accept responsibility for her or his conduct.

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<sup>39</sup>Townsend, *Mission at Nuremberg*, 158-59,186,190,225,251.

<sup>40</sup>Townsend, 251.

<sup>41</sup>C. F. W. Walther, *Law and Gospel: How to Read and Apply the Bible* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2010), 481.

<sup>42</sup>This is a case the author consulted on.

<sup>43</sup>Mark 6:7.

## Lesson #6: Remember the offender was once a boy or girl

In working with the Nazi war criminals, Gerecke consciously sought to remember that “before their alliance with Hitler, before the choices they made that led to mayhem and murder, they had all been boys once and that they were still God’s children.”<sup>44</sup> Indeed, Gerecke reminded the condemned men of the Bible verses each had received upon their confirmation as children.<sup>45</sup> When standing with convicted war criminal Karl-Heinz Keitel on the gallows, Gerecke offered a prayer Keitel recalled his mother telling him long before he became a participant in genocide: “Christ’s blood and judgment are my adornment and robe of honor; therein I will stand before God when I go to heaven.”<sup>46</sup>

In working with men and women who have sexually violated children, pastors may also find it beneficial to see these parishioners as children. Although most victims of abuse do not grow up to be sex offenders, a large number of offenders endured multiple forms of trauma. Indeed, recent research on male sex offenders finds that more than half of these offenders were maltreated in four or more categories of abuse including sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse, and emotional neglect.<sup>47</sup> This is not to suggest childhood trauma causes abuse. An offender is always responsible for their conduct no matter what their childhood was like. This is simply to suggest that understanding and addressing these issues can assist an offender in turning away from his or her sins.<sup>48</sup>

When an offender also endured significant childhood trauma, researchers have found that a “trauma-informed therapy” can reduce characteristics that may result in future offenses.<sup>49</sup> Although the job of therapy is best left to sex offender treatment providers and other professionals, a pastor may be able to tag team with these professionals to address spiritual questions or dynamics pertaining to the offender’s childhood. In this way, the mental health and spiritual counselors are more likely to be treating the fire and not simply the smoke that has shaped an offender’s views and conduct.

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<sup>44</sup>Townsend, *Mission at Nuremberg*, 141.

<sup>45</sup>Townsend, 159.

<sup>46</sup>Townsend, 272-273.

<sup>47</sup>Jill S. Levenson et al., “Adverse Childhood Experiences in the Lives of Male Sex Offenders: Implications for Trauma-Informed Care,” *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research & Treatment* (2014): 1-20.

<sup>48</sup>This may happen, in part, when an offender empathizes with his own victimization and is able to gain a deeper empathy for the children he or she has violated.

<sup>49</sup>Levenson

## Lesson #7: Be cautious in pronouncing forgiveness

Shortly before Hermann Goering killed himself, Pastor Gerecke met with him in his cell in an attempt to save his soul. Goering, though, was unrepentant, poking fun at the creation account in the book of Genesis, ridiculing the concept of the verbal inspiration of the Scriptures, and rejecting the Christian concept of atonement, going so far as to call Jesus “just another smart Jew.”<sup>50</sup>

Nonetheless, Goering wanted to go through the motions of receiving Holy Communion as a sort of “insurance policy” in case Christianity was really true.<sup>51</sup> In response, Gerecke refused to administer communion, telling Goering “I cannot with a clear conscience commune you because you deny the very Christ who instituted the sacrament . . . You may be on the church roll, but you do not have faith in Christ and have not accepted him as your savior. Therefore, you are not a Christian, and as a Christian pastor I cannot commune you.”<sup>52</sup>

Gerecke tried again to bring his parishioner to repentance, telling Goering “(y)ou’ll never see your daughter, Edda, in heaven if you refuse the Lord’s way of salvation.”<sup>53</sup> Nonetheless, Goering refused, saying he would simply have to “take my chances, my own way.”<sup>54</sup>

The tough approach Gerecke took with Goering in demanding a clear confession and otherwise seeking some fruit of repentance is a sound approach to working with adults who have molested children and who have convinced themselves that their conduct is not sinful, or at least not as sinful as the conduct of others.<sup>55</sup>

In assessing the “repentance” of a sex offender, one scholar suggests that pastors seek a “true confession” from the penitent that does not involve blaming the victim or others for their conduct and that the pastor ask the penitent “tough questions” including:

- Have you informed your spouse that you have sexually abused your child? If your wife wants you to move out of the house, are you willing to do it? If the child victim wants you to leave the house are you willing to do it?

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<sup>50</sup>Townsend, *Mission at Nuremberg*, 260-261.

<sup>51</sup>Townsend, 264-265.

<sup>52</sup>A recorded lecture in which Gerecke details his conversation with Goering is available online at: <http://www.stjohnchester.com/Gerecke/Gerecke.html>, accessed February 14, 2014.

<sup>53</sup>Joseph E. Perisco, *Nuremberg: Infamy on Trial* (New York: Viking, 1994), 420.

<sup>54</sup>Townsend, 265.

<sup>55</sup>Vieth, “What Would Walther Do?” 257, 270-271.

- Have you informed your child’s medical provider that you have violated her body?
- Have you referred your child to a counselor to assist in coping with the abuse you have inflicted on him or her?
- Do you hold yourself fully responsible for your conduct—or do you believe your victim in some way contributed to the abuse?
- Have you turned yourself in to the police? Are you willing to confess your crimes to the police or will you make them ‘prove it’? If the government files charges for crimes you have committed, will you be pleading guilty or will you force your child victim to testify publicly and be grilled by any attorney you hire?
- Are you willing to enroll in a sex offender treatment program?<sup>56</sup>

Even if a pastor announces God’s forgiveness, it is appropriate to expect, even demand appropriate fruits of repentance such as turning oneself into the police and taking action to address the needs of the victim or victims. This is not in any way a new Christian concept. For example, Martin Luther’s Catechism urged parishioners receiving Holy Communion to demonstrate genuine fruits of repentance including fighting temptation and doing “my best to correct whatever wrongs I have committed.”<sup>57</sup>

Like the Pharaoh of Egypt,<sup>58</sup> many sex offenders are adept at promising a change in behavior but short on delivering actual change.<sup>59</sup> A pastor can play a critical role in ensuring a sex offender follows through on his or her promises to reform.

### **Lesson #8: Remind the offender of the second thief on the cross**

In the Gospel of Luke, we are told that two thieves were crucified with our Lord. One of these thieves was unrepentant, mocking Jesus and demanding that he be taken from the cross.<sup>60</sup> The other thief did not ask

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<sup>56</sup>Townsend, *Mission at Nuremberg*, 270-271.

<sup>57</sup>See “Personal Preparation for Holy Communion,” *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1993), 156.

<sup>58</sup>Exodus, chapters 7-14.

<sup>59</sup>Convicted child molester Jerry Sandusky, for example, once expressed remorse about showering with boys but then continued to shower with and molest children. See Victor I. Vieth, et al, “Lessons from Penn State: A Call to Implement a New Pattern of Training for Mandated Reporters and Child Protection Professionals,” *CenterPiece* 3, no. 3 & 4 (2012):1. When confronted in 1998 about showering with and touching a naked boy, Sandusky said to the victim’s mother: “I was wrong. I wish I could get forgiveness. I know I won’t get it from you. I wish I were dead.”

<sup>60</sup>Luke 23:39.

that the earthly penalty for his crimes be reduced. Indeed, this man said "(w)e are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve."<sup>61</sup> Instead, this man simply threw himself upon the mercy of God. In response, Jesus told the man "(t)oday you will be with me in paradise."<sup>62</sup>

In deciding to provide spiritual counseling to the men on trial at Nuremberg, the account of the thief on the cross "loomed large in Gerecke's thoughts as he prayed for direction . . ." <sup>63</sup> Although he realized "God wanted something incredible from him," Gerecke also believed the Gospel of Luke provided a clear direction for performing this ministry.<sup>64</sup>

Although the Gospel of Luke led Gerecke to deny the sacrament to Goering, it also led him to pronounce God's forgiveness to three of the defendants, of whom Gerecke wrote "God has changed these hearts along the way and now in the face of losing all material things, even their life, they could hear the promises of God to penitent sinners through the lips of Jesus who receives sin-burdened souls."<sup>65</sup>

In a similar way, a sex offender may have to lose everything including his family, his livelihood, and even his freedom before finally understanding the value of the gospel. A pastor may have to aid this process by demanding the penitent accept prison or other earthly consequences and cease with all excuses for his crimes. When this happens, when an offender sees only one recourse for his or her sins, the sweet release of the gospel can be applied in all its glory. Gerecke understood there is no sinner for whom the gospel does not apply and this truth extends not only to war criminals but to child abusers. It is, simply put, an amazing grace.

### **Lesson #9: Find an avenue to care for yourself**

In descending into the hell of the Nazi cruelties at the heart of the Nuremberg trials, Gerecke not only found time to pray and continue in the word, he also found solace in his friends. He and Father O'Conner found humor to be a relief and shared a love for baseball that included wagering on the outcome of the World Series.<sup>66</sup>

Practicing self-care is critical to those working in the field of child protection—including pastors. Gerecke used prayer, Scripture, friendship, and baseball in order to cope. Pastors engaging in this work

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<sup>61</sup>Luke 23:41.

<sup>62</sup>Luke 23:42-43.

<sup>63</sup>Townsend, *Mission at Nuremberg*, 104-105.

<sup>64</sup>Townsend, 104-105.

<sup>65</sup>Townsend, 253.

<sup>66</sup>Townsend, 259.

should develop their own list of activities and sources of relieving tension and anxiety. In addition to having a fellow pastor assist in coping with difficult theological issues arising when counseling a sex offender, a fellow pastor can be extremely helpful in tending to the spiritual needs of those counseling offenders.

When boarding an airplane, passengers are instructed to put on their own mask before tending to the needs of others. In a similar vein, pastors counseling sex offenders must be proactive in addressing their own physical, emotional, and spiritual needs. Unless a pastor practices self-care, he will be of limited value to the penitent.

### **Lesson #10: Prepare yourself for criticism from multiple sources**

In tending to the spiritual needs of Nazi war criminals, Henry Gerecke subjected himself to criticism from multiple sources. Gerecke was severely criticized for even shaking hands with the Nazi criminals, much less providing spiritual comfort.<sup>67</sup> After the trials, Gerecke received hate mail with some calling him a “Nazi lover” and an “anti-Semite” who had comforted those responsible for the murder of millions.<sup>68</sup> On the other hand, Gerecke was criticized by some clergy for withholding communion from Goering.<sup>69</sup>

Clergy providing spiritual counseling to sex offenders often face criticism from multiple parties. The victim and his or her loved ones may be angry, even hurt that a pastor would counsel a molester. The offender him or herself often has multiple supporters within a church who refuse to believe the offender has committed the crimes or, if he has, that he is fully responsible for his conduct. These supporters may be upset when a pastor withholds the sacraments from an unrepentant sinner or otherwise exercises church discipline. Although criticism of this kind may be understandable, it does not make it easier for a pastor to administer law and gospel to an offender.

In practicing self-care, a pastor may wish to brace himself for unfair criticism and also prepare his family. This is one additional factor warranting a self-care plan that includes a support network for the pastor and pastor’s family.

### **Conclusion**

Henry Gerecke said a “religion without forgiveness is only the ghost of religion which haunts the grave of dead faith and lost hope.”<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>67</sup>Townsend, *Mission at Nuremberg*, 140-141.

<sup>68</sup>Townsend, 298.

<sup>69</sup>Townsend, 267.

<sup>70</sup>Townsend, 305.

It was in this faith that Gerecke lived and died. After his military service, Gerecke returned to his wife and eventually became a chaplain at the Menard penitentiary, "a maximum-security facility filled with twenty-five hundred murderers and rapists who he believed needed to hear the gospel in the most desperate way."<sup>71</sup>

After Gerecke died suddenly of a heart attack, it was these very murderers and rapists who accorded their pastor a remarkable honor. These criminals requested, and the Gerecke family agreed, to have the reverend's body transported to the prison chapel where some 800 of the "most dangerous men in the country" filed past the casket to pay their last respects.<sup>72</sup> According to the Associated Press, these criminals considered Gerecke to be "their only friend."<sup>73</sup>

To many sex offenders, their only friend may be the pastor who brings them the gospel. In delivering this saving message, the pastor must be prepared to be lied to, to be criticized unjustly, and to face agonizing hours reviewing or hearing harrowing accounts of abuse and ravaged lives. The pastor who endures to the end, who overcomes the fear, tears, and anger associated with this work, may one day see the most broken and hardened of souls joining him in paradise.

It is a cross worth carrying.

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<sup>71</sup>Townsend, *Mission at Nuremberg*, 299.

<sup>72</sup>Townsend, 308.

<sup>73</sup>Townsend, 308.