Wider circle

With the jailing of a former Plymouth diocesan officer and a Vatican investigation into sex abuse at Ealing Abbey, attention is returning to the scandal of child abuse in the Church. Meanwhile, a new support system is seeking to help ex-offenders avoid committing further paedophile offences.

A
fter Gerry Hurley's friend John Day developed cancer, he visited him in hospital, where he was undergoing his second operation. "If there's anything I can do, then I do it," he says. When Day emerged from hospital, having had his bladder removed, Hurley went to his home, showered him, sorted his clothes and made sure he had something to eat.

But Gerry Hurley is more than a friend, even an exceptional one. He's also a man who has served a 30-year jail sentence for sexually abusing and raping one of his two daughters, from when she was five until she was 17. And John Day was not just a friend: he was a member of Gerry Hurley's circle, a group of volunteers who came together, when Hurley was released from prison, both to support his reintegration into the community and to help him manage any possible reversion to his former behaviours.

"Care works both ways," says Hurley, who also knows that while the people in his circle did become friends - he is still in touch with two of them, though the circle has formally come to a close - they would report him to the police or probation service if his behaviour had become risky. "That's what a friend would do," he explains. "A friend would say, 'You're not firing on all cylinders and I think you need some help,' and help might mean picking up the phone and ringing the police."

Circles of Support and Accountability - to give them their full title - have become, in just a decade, the fastest-growing approach to the management of sexual offenders in the community. The first circle was formed in Britain in 2001; by the end of last January, there were 64 in operation. Between August and December 2010, 11 more circles came into being. They have a finite life and is it reckoned that there have been more than 160 circles in operation up to the beginning of this year.

Their origins are in Canada, where the first circle was formed in 1994 in Hamilton, Ontario, when members of a local Mennonite church gathered around a just-released offender. The idea was brought to Britain by the Quakers. Today, Circles UK, the national body supporting the development and coordination of local circles, is offering consultancy in the Netherlands and Belgium, where circles are being set up, while interest has also come from Spain, Latvia, South Africa and Australia.

Treatment programmes for sex offenders are now fairly well available (if not sufficiently so) in both prisons and the community. But men - and men make up the overwhelming majority of such offenders - leave prison, which may often have become for them a safe and familiar place, with its own routines, and where they know people and people are known to them. Adjustment to the outside world can be particularly difficult if they have served lengthy sentences. Even the cost of a bus fare may prove a small cultural shock, a portent of things to come.

And help may not be forthcoming. Former sex offenders are probably the most despised group in society, pariahs even among fellow prisoners. They may well be burdened with the (often horrific) crimes they have committed and live in fear of that past being exposed while they seek the ordinary things in life, such as a job and a home. What they have done may have estranged them from friends and family; they may have no idea (like Hurley) where their wives or children live.

Even if they do know, the conditions of their licence may preclude them from even entering the town where their children live. They may feel that what they have done precludes any right to contact, and that even if it were allowed, they would prefer to exile themselves voluntarily from others.

This is where a Circle of Support and Accountability comes in. Each circle is a small group - perhaps no more than four or five - of very diverse people. They will have different social backgrounds; they are men and women; they may be grandparents or not even yet in a steady relationship. They may be not long out of university or have several years of retirement behind them. What they have in common is a wish to help others, to try to attempt to reduce the possibility of reoffending, and ensure that the core member (as the former offender is known) is helped to manage his behaviour, held accountable for what he does and, in extreme cases, where behaviour becomes problematic, that probation services and the police are involved.

Core members join a circle for a variety of reasons - for companionship and help to return to the community, but also because they want to put their offending behind them and seek help so that that reoffending does not occur. They may be determined that that will not happen, but they know it remains a possibility. And in seeking this help, they turn to an impartial group of people, who do not get paid for their time and effort. Circle members are also not like probation officers, whom offenders may see as part of the "system", with which they can never really be at ease, whatever help it may offer.

Core members frequently ask volunteers, on first meeting, why they bother to spend their time and energy, with no financial reward, helping someone like them. The answer is that not only does the volunteer (Continued on page 8.)
The impact of the Arab uprising is spreading across North Africa and the Middle East, with Syria’s ruling regime currently facing international opprobrium. But it is in Egypt that the character of the region’s politics will be mapped out – with serious implications for the Christian minorities.

The so-called “Arab Spring” has achieved political change in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt. But outside this North African region, in Bahrain and Syria, the movement has an undetermined future.

One marker of political change has been generational, with a younger group displacing authoritarian regimes which had been in place for decades.

Born in the 1980s or 1990s, they do not wish now to be “objects” of politics, on the margin, but seek to be their subject. Political and religious opinions in the region recognize a desire for independence, sovereignty and authenticity in a world marked by new powers China, India and Brazil, and a decline of the West.

It might be said that for the first time since the 1970s, and the grass-roots side of the Iranian Islamic revolution, geopolitics cannot be analysed without taking into account at least in part the aspirations of people who have little control over their destinies.

The relationship between religion and cultural politics is key to this and will be closely viewed as elections take place in the wake of rapid change. For example, in the recent Tunisian elections, whilst Islam was not the sole player, it was a major contestant.

Indeed, there is no overarching theme that sums up the moment, apart from uncharted change. In Turkey, for example, it is difficult to know if we are seeing the emergence of a new Young Turk revolution or a return to an Ottoman model. In fact, the political model of the centre-right AKP (the ruling Justice and Development Party under Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan) is being strongly marketed as the solution to Sunni Islam in relation to governance and religion elsewhere.

The influential commentator Olivier Roy has noted that a gradual re-Islamisation of society and culture took place under authoritarian politics, a process marked by individual piety orientated towards spiritual sustenance and Islamic political solutions.

This is a paradox as authoritarian rule encouraged a strong state and a weak society, which might account for an emerging political landscape which will be noted for its coalitions.

Tunisia has, despite political differences, a relatively monolithic population which has certainly eased the transition to elections. However, Libya has deep tribal and regional affiliations which mean it will take time to reconcile differences. Neither of these societies hosts a significant indigenous Christian communities, although large numbers of sub-Saharan and Coptic Christians from Egypt worked in Libya in particular.

Difference in the part of North Africa, along with Algeria and Morocco, is reflected in Arab and Berber tension, and strains between these groups have been rising recently. That said, however, an evangelical movement has been growing, attracting mainly converts from Islam across the region.

This has brought tensions with the mainline Churches, which formed a modus vivendi with these post-colonial states. Conversion and Islamic radicalism might be seen as markers of cultural and political crisis over the question of religion.

It is in Egypt, due to its size and influence in the Arab world, that the character of politics in the region will be mapped out. Elections are scheduled for 28 November and under the previous regime these would have had a certain

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want to do something to prevent further abuse, but also that he or she sees the other person as more than the sum of his offences.

What is the evidence that circles have a marked effect on reoffending, when recidivism rates generally are so high and many sex offenders return to prison? Circles participants have requested the support of a circle and have been accepted as suitable, so the degree of motivation and commitment not to reoffend is likely to be higher than for those not requesting support.

To date, Canada offers the most rigorous and extensive research on circles and provides firm evidence that they do reduce reoffending rates among those most likely to reoffend. But studies also indicate that the community's perception about its own safety is increased where circles operate.

In one study, reoffending was 70 per cent less than in the non-circle control group, while those who did reoffend from the circles group committed less serious offences than their original ones. Another piece of research not only found a marked reduction in reoffending rates for the circles group, but the authors said that there was a "marked, positive effect on the community integration and long-term functioning of high-risk sexual offenders released".

Home-grown research is not as well developed as in Canada, although a long-term study is now being undertaken at Leeds University. However, the available evidence comes to much the same conclusion: there are impressively low rates of re-offense among those who have been in a circle compared with those who have not. This may not just be that behaviour has been managed but that, thanks to the accountability aspect of a circle’s work, reoffending has been prevented by recall to prison when men have breached conditions of their licence.

Although among populist politicians there remains a continuing emphasis that the way to tackle sex-offending is to toughen and tighten the freedom of individuals, the Home Office has supported the idea of Circles of Support and Accountability almost from the beginning.

When men are released from prison, they have to live somewhere, and many want to live law-abiding lives. To demonize and exclude them only increases the likelihood of reoffending, putting more children in danger. Circles show that an offence-free life needs support from, and accountability to, trusted adults. It is a practical road to redemption.

Names in this article have been changed.

Terry Philpot is the author (with Stephen Harney and Chris Wilson) of A Community Based Approach to the Reduction of Sex Reoffending: Circles of Support and Accountability, published this month by Jessica Kingsley Publishing. He is also a trustee of Circles UK.