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## San Jose Mercury News (CA)

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### ONE SINNER'S REPENTANCE

SANTA CRUZ CHURCH EMBRACES CONFESSED SEX OFFENDER, NOW ASSISTANT PASTOR April 10, 2005

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KEN MCLAUGHLIN, Mercury News

**Memo:** ALSO RAN: page 1B, Morning Final edition**Illustration:** Photos (2)**Caption:** PHOTO: KAREN T. BORCHERS -- MERCURY NEWS

[Michelle and Bill Bjorkman]

PHOTO: KAREN T. BORCHERS -- MERCURY NEWS

Bill Bjorkman cares for his 5-month-old daughter, Abigail, at the home in Scotts Valley he shares with his wife, Michelle Bjorkman.

During his morning sermon last Sunday, Senior Pastor Dave Johnston of the Calvary Chapel in Santa Cruz preached redemption. He mentioned Mary Magdalene, the prostitute chosen by Christ to be the first witness to his resurrection, as a powerful example of faith changing someone's life. But when he began to talk about someone "closer to home," Johnston choked back tears.

One of his own assistant pastors, Johnston disclosed to 250 members of the congregation, is a registered sex offender who has spent time in prison.

Church members know Bill Bjorkman as the kindly Pastor Bill, an ordained pastor for the past three years for a congregation that is part of a worldwide network of more than 2,000 non-denominational churches founded by Chuck Smith. Smith is the originator of "the Jesus Movement," which more than three decades ago in Southern California began ministering to flower children, gang-bangers, heroin addicts and many of society's rejects.

When Johnston talked about Bjorkman's past, no one gasped. And many church members broke into applause to praise the work God had done to redeem Bjorkman's life.

"It's a faith-tester," Bjorkman, 37, said as congregation members offered him hugs and reassurances. Several men had tears in their eyes, telling Bjorkman they felt they had been carrying around their own dark secrets for far too long.

Everyone from religious leaders to prison guards understands that true change comes from deep within. Whether it is through Jesus or hours of intense clinical therapy, sex offenders learn to understand and control the forces that led them to commit their sordid crimes. Still, powerful questions remain -- religious as well as secular.

Do those with troubled pasts -- like Mary Magdalene -- become especially vigilant Christians because they remain aware of past sins? And where does all of this leave victims?

Living with crime

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Replay

The victims in the Bjorkman case could not be reached for comment. Deborah Baldocchi, a deputy district attorney for Santa Clara County who prosecuted Bjorkman, said the district attorney's office doesn't reveal the identities of sex-crime victims because it wants to protect their privacy, helping to ensure that other victims will come forward.

"But I can tell you from past experience that they'll have to live with this crime forever," said Baldocchi, who has prosecuted sex crimes for seven years.

She said she periodically talks to victims years after the crimes. "Many report doing better, but very few are doing great," she said.

Bjorkman is profoundly aware of how deeply he wounded his victims. He said he can't undo his crimes, but prays every day that his victims will experience the healing power of Jesus.

Less than five years ago, Bjorkman was sitting in a cell at Folsom Prison, where he served 18 months of a three-year sentence for abusing two young teens from 1989 to 1992. Bjorkman, a Saratoga High graduate, was then a student at San Jose State, in his early 20s.

When Bjorkman decided to come clean with his wife, Michelle Bjorkman, in early 1998 after his victims contacted him, she initially decided to separate from him. "I felt like a pane of glass shattered by a rock," she said. "I had lost my husband and my best friend."

The pain was sharpened because of her father's recent death. She prayed for a sign from God that her husband was repentant and that they should stay together.

She grilled him about his secret life. Her husband, who had rarely cried, wept and wept.

"There were enough real tears that I knew I was looking at a broken man," she said. "I knew at that point that our marriage would be saved."

Turning to church

A few days later, Michelle heard a commercial for a church on her car radio. She jotted down the address of a Calvary Chapel in San Jose and told her husband she wanted to go on Sunday. He agreed.

Neither Bill or Michelle was very religious at the time, so they attended a New Believers class and "saw so much love and grace," said Bill. But Michelle worried what would happen if church members found out about her husband. She broke down in the church.

They met with an assistant pastor. "He prayed with us. We wept, and I told him about the wicked thing I had done," Bill said. "We received Christ. We were born again."

A few weeks later, San Jose police arrested Bjorkman at his San Jose home.

His attorney, Sam Polverino, warned him that he faced a three-year sentence and hundreds of hard-core prisoners who had little tolerance for the kind of crimes he had committed.

But Bjorkman was extremely remorseful and determined to plead guilty, Polverino said. After being sent to San Quentin for processing, Bjorkman was transferred to Folsom. During his year and a half there, he read through the Bible several times and studied 400 books on Christianity.

"That was my Bible college," he said.

While he was locked up, his wife lived in Boulder Creek, where she sought the support of her family and church friends while finishing up her bachelor's degree in child development at San Jose State.

When Bjorkman got out of prison in August 2000, he joined a Bible studies group in Scotts Valley before hooking up with the Calvary Chapel in Santa Cruz. A year and a half later, Johnston asked him to be a pastor.

Johnston, who as a youth pastor at the San Jose Calvary Chapel met Bjorkman before he went to prison, called him a compassionate man who "knows my heart better than I do. He's become one of my best friends."

Online registry

Johnston and his assistant pastors had fielded a few calls about Bjorkman from congregation members and people who saw his name on a list of registered sex offenders. The calls became more frequent after the Megan's Law registry, named after a New Jersey girl killed by a child molester, went online in California in December.

Bjorkman told Johnston that it was time to make sure everyone knew about his past. So Johnston made the unusual move of announcing it

from the pulpit.

"It's a lot to take in," Justis Earle, 23, said shortly after Johnston's sermon. "But if you think about it, everybody has something to hide."

The Bjorkmans, who live with their 5-month-old daughter in Scotts Valley, are under no illusions that some parts of society won't be as understanding.

"It is a hard pill for a lot of people to swallow," said Michelle, who heads the women's ministry.

Even though Bjorkman is no longer on parole or probation, he has chosen not to have regular contact with minor children in his role as a pastor. "I would never want my past to cause a parent to struggle or to question how their child is being ministered to at church," he said.

Tiffany De La Torre, 23, a church member, isn't concerned about her children being around him.

"It doesn't bother me because I know God is a God of grace, and Bill's sins have been forgiven," said De La Torre, who has a 3-year-old boy and a 6-month-old girl. "I would trust Bill and Michelle with my children as I would trust my mother."

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