



THE PLAIN DEALER

Hundreds in church look to void past crimes

Told to support legislation that gives second chance

Sunday, August 14, 2005

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The Rev. Mark C. Olds stood at the pulpit Saturday and looked at the 800 people staring expectantly from the plush lavender pews.

They had streamed into the Cathedral Church of God in Christ on Cleveland's East Side pushing baby carriages and carrying sleeping children in their arms. Some were dressed in their Sunday finest, arriving with their hair done and nails polished. Others sported flip-flops, bandanas and tattoos.

But in one way, they were very much alike: All had criminal records, or loved someone who did. They wanted to know how they could apply for good jobs or qualify for student loans without their felonies popping up during routine background checks. How could they earn a decent living or go to school?

They had come for quick salvation, for Olds to tell them what they wanted to hear. Instead, he told them the truth.

"You didn't get into this mess in a day," he said, his North Carolina lilt bouncing off the vaulted ceiling. "You're not going to get out of it in a day either."

Ohio law prevents most residents with more than one conviction -- whether they are felonies or misdemeanors -- from having their criminal records sealed by the court, even if they have been model citizens for years.

Olds is trying to build support for legislation, conceived by him and sponsored by State Rep. Shirley Smith, a Cleveland Democrat, that would allow people with several convictions who have stayed out of trouble for seven years to ask that their criminal records be sealed, or expunged.

Once their convictions are expunged, prospective employers won't be able to learn about their records. Any agency that broadcasts the information would face fines of up to \$1 million. Only police and government agencies can access a sealed criminal file.

"You could almost describe it as a jobs bill," said lawyer David Dawson, deputy director of the Legal Aid Society of Cleveland, who was there to answer questions from the throng.

The legislation was written in June after a slew of forums just like Saturday's, with hours spent listening to stories of men and women in search of a second chance.

"Today, some of you will learn that you are ineligible for expungement," Olds said. Groans erupted from the crowd, bodies shifted, some headed for the door.

"I do not want you to leave," Olds called out. "I do not want you to be discouraged! Stay with us, work with us because we are working to change the law -- somebody oughta shout hallelujah! Clap you hands! Get excited!"

"Amen!" someone yelled and a wave of applause drowned out the clatter of exiting feet.

A man in a black T-shirt and long denim shorts jumped up. "You're not doing any good for us!" he shouted. "Everybody is getting up and leaving! Everybody here needs food, water and shelter!"

Olds tried to calm him, but the man wouldn't listen and started swearing, loud and long.

"You can excuse yourself sir. This is a house of God," Olds said quietly.

He understood the man's frustration. A reformed sinner himself, Mark Olds was riding a bus 16 years ago to a halfway house with \$100 in his pocket, no job prospects and a rap sheet that included armed robbery and manslaughter.

Unfazed by the outburst, the pastor moved along. "Did everyone get a copy of the highlights of House Bill 317," he asked.

So far, no opposition to the bill has emerged, though the Ohio Prosecuting Attorneys Association has not weighed in on the issue, according to Cuyahoga County Prosecutor Bill Mason, who heads the group.

Cleveland City Council President Frank Jackson, who is running for mayor, pressed flesh and urged everyone to join Olds at 10 a.m., Tuesday, Sept. 13, in Columbus for a prayer rally in front of the Statehouse during the week legislators are to set hearings for the bill.

Cuyahoga County Common Pleas Judge Dick Ambrose and Cleveland Municipal Court Judge Joan Synenberg shook hands and dispensed advice to a line of people that snaked from the front of the church to the back.

"I'm here on behalf of my son," one woman said, her voice trembling. "In 1992, at 18, he was convicted of a drug possession charge, then he got into an altercation with another kid at Severance Mall and was convicted of assault. He's 31 years old now and has been arrest-free since 1992. Can he get his record expunged?"

"No," Ambrose answered. "Once you have two offenses, you're stuck -- unless we can change the statute."

The woman's eyes welled with tears.

"It seems that God forgives easier than the state forgives," Ambrose said.

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