

Discernment and Development of Religious Professionals

Bishop David Richard The ISTI Sun, V3N1, January 1997 This article is an edited paper by Bishop David Richards with the assistance of Dr Ralph Earle, Fr James J Gill SJ, MD, Craig Evans, and Marilyn Peterson of the ISTI board This is the first in a series of edited reports from the ISTI Listening Conferences held in Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and Saint Louis. In his article entitled "Priests, Power and Sexual Abuse" James J Gill states that "research, along with clinical experience, has repeatedly shown that power is intimately and consistently related to sexual abuse" (Human Development, 16.2). This is true not only when an ordained person is the perpetrator of the sexual exploitation and abuse; it is true for the general population. It is a factor in all abusive episodes performed by all persons under any and all circumstances. However, it is especially offensive when the perpetrator is one whose trusted position would seem to guarantee safety to all those coming in touch with him or her. As one observer noted recently, we seem to be living in a time in which there are institutions which pledge healing but create horror. The sociologist Max Weber has defined power as "the possibility of imposing one's will upon the behavior of other persons" (McClelland, DC, Power: The Inner Experience. New York: Irvington Publishers, Inc 1975). The distinguished economist John Kenneth Galbraith expands somewhat on this basic definition when he describes the exercise of power simply as "someone or some group imposing its will or purpose or purposes on others, including those who are reluctant or adverse" (The Anatomy of Power. Boston: Houton Mifflin Co, 1983). The abuse of power can take place only when one person has a need to exercise power in one form or another and at that point in time encounters another person who for one reason or another either actually is or clearly feels powerless. It is now evident in the light of numerous horrifying revelations across religious traditions and denominations that life in religious agencies and institutions provides unique circumstances that invite power abuse. Historically this has always been known. Annals are replete with instances that can be described in no way other than the gross abuse of power. At the same time, when this phenomenon is driven home to our consciousness in terms of sexual violations which damage personhood, sometimes beyond recovery, and destroy the emotional and spiritual integrity (ie, inner health and wholeness) of the individual, we come to see the abuse of power as resulting in something even more invidious than the political disruption or

structural distortion of institutions. The misuse of power of ordained persons is rooted at least in part in the perception of special entitlement that is often attributed to clergy. In many instances they are treated with exceptional deference. Loyal, devoted, dependent, and genuinely loving constituents place clergy on a pedestal. In that exalted position they are granted trust and given power and authority but without the necessary balancing element of accountability. There are few professions in which it is so easily possible to play the role of the lone ranger, to separate from peers, to evade the application of behavioral and professional criteria, to escape the notice of superiors, to be exclusively in control of one's time, and to be, without any questions asked, one's own boss. At the same time, with all of this freedom from controls and restraints, the ordained person may, in fact, feel neither powerful nor influential. He or she may, indeed, be highly vulnerable to feelings of deep personal need and to a sense of his or her own lack of power. While being in such a remarkably detached isolation -- or feeling to be in this unconnected state -- the ordained person may be responding constantly to demands made to give and give and give to others without adequate regard for or support to self. Not being well schooled in self-care, the combination of isolation, lack of support and heavy demands leads to burnout and possibly to some distorted way of seeking to restore balance to life. The stage is now set for these feelings of powerlessness to impact behavior. The neurotic, or even more accurately, the pathologic, solution to such a situation is to find a weaker, less powerful person to exploit in an unconscious effort to attain a sense of power to compensate for loneliness and depletion. Given the favored position of the pastor, the congregational "manager," the liturgical director, the community leader, the personal and spiritual counselor -- that is, this person with unprecedented access to the lives and the homes and the families of his constituents, finding someone to be his or her victim is clearly no problem. When this has been accomplished on the first occasion it becomes a relatively easy matter to do it over and over again. A prominent leader in the regional office of a major denomination was finally detected as being abusive and exploitative. When the detection was accomplished and treatment begun, this person admitted to having had ninety-five sexual partners in the course of a long and seemingly distinguished ministry. We are now painfully aware of this scenario. The manifestations of such misuse of power have become common knowledge. But the question is, what does it take on the part of an ordained person to live the life of professional religious service and avoid the trap of feeling powerless and thus being set up for the misuse and abuse of the power that he or she actually does possess? This is the major question being considered here. Somehow or other those serving in the ordained ministry of any religious institution or denomination will have to learn how -- in the words of Pinderhughes -- to be "comfortable with themselves and with their

own power needs. High self-esteem, which we have learned is in part dependent on a clear and positive sense of cultural identity, is needed along with a strong sense of self-differentiation" (Understanding Race, Ethnicity and Power. New York: The Free Press, 1989). Factors Contributing to the Misuse of Power Factors which contribute to the misuse of power on the part of ordained ministers fall into three categories. Some factors are clearly related to the personality and mental health status of the individual. Some -- as suggested above -- are related to certain unique systemic features present in the structures and customs found in organized religions. Others may spring from particular situations that arise and prove challenging or threatening to a minister. Persons presenting themselves for possible selection into the ordination process of a religious body bring with them a family history, a unique and individual course of psycho-sexual development, and a set of needs, some quite conscious and others unconscious, that they hope will be met through being accepted for ordination and admission into full-time ministry. One of the prevailing aspects in almost all systems is a tendency to be self-protective. When this tendency is strong and when protecting the system is seen as an absolute necessity, then it is possible, literally, to commit murder without being called to account. We are now keenly aware of the extent to which offenders and perpetrators have been and in some places continue to be protected by the system. Systems cause abuse simply by allowing it to occur without punishment. Systems sponsor and uphold patterns of religious belief and theological dogma. Variations with regard to what is believed by and in a system are so great that it is not possible to analyze all such belief patterns that may contribute to sexually abusive situations. However, there is one contributing article of belief that appears to be present in many religious systems. Where religion purports to be exclusively interested in and exclusively concerned about the spiritual welfare and salvation of the individual and when the religious system teaches and promotes programs only around this core belief, there is a resulting dissociation of body and spirit and a further dissociation of belief and behavior. So much value is attached to correct belief that issues of behavior are so secondary that almost any behavior can be conveniently overlooked. When the system as a whole focuses so exclusively on faith and belief and correct dogma, then adherents participate in this dissociation. An offending minister can lead worship, preach sermons, give Bible instruction and play the ministerial role while successfully unhooking his offending behaviors from the content and the process of his narrowly religious thought. Systemic survival is enhanced by keeping attention riveted on belief patterns and by being reluctant or perhaps intentionally failing to uphold those behavioral patterns which clearly derive from the belief patterns. Systemic dissociation provides the climate or the setting for the psychological/emotional dissociation that

accounts for so many of the instances of sexual exploitation and abuse now coming to our attention. Even when the individual may be balanced, mature and well-differentiated and even when he or she may not be under the influence of a system that is patriarchal, self-protecting and dissociative, there can still be occasions or situations in which the minister is vulnerable -- situations which tremble on the brink of disaster. Such situations may involve encounters with persons who are severely neurotic or mentally ill. Situations that are threatening may arise at a time when the minister is depleted or for one reason or another feeling isolated and cut-off. Some emotional crisis in her/his own life may have knocked things out of balance for the moment. It is unlikely that situations of such danger can always be avoided, but through effective training and adequate anticipatory guidance, disaster can be averted.

The Current Situation: What's Missing? The current situation in many religious systems and organizations gives cause for alarm simply because many of the ingredients that would help to prevent instances of power abuse and sexual exploitation are missing. Eight essential ingredients are:

1. awareness of the meaning and purpose of appropriate boundaries to be fixed and maintained between minister and adherent for the health and safety of both.
2. a setting for students in training and formation and for ordained ministers themselves which would allow for open and honest discussion of one's own sexuality.
3. attention to emotional development and the availability of individual counseling offered without prejudice to individuals to help them understand better who they are sexually.
4. sexuality education offered at the graduate school level (as in medical schools) as a means of dealing with gaps that may exist in regard to all aspects of sexual knowledge.
5. practical training and instruction with regard to sexuality and ethics, and familiarization with the great disparity of viewpoints and practices in our current society.
6. training and anticipatory guidance regarding the prevention of burn-out in ministry.
7. practical training in leadership development to include understanding about the use and misuse of authority and power.
8. preparing those in ministry training to accept and value routine supervision, accountability procedures, and peer review as a normal part of the work of ministry.

This list is hardly complete; however, perhaps it is sufficient to suggest that the current situation demands that in all of the various religious and denominational systems, the entire process of selection, formation and training for ordained ministry needs careful scrutiny and realistic assessment with an eye toward revision where needed. Something isn't working, and lives are being damaged and lost at great cost to religious institutions and to our society in general. Even in spite of the publicity, current cases of sexual abuse in ministry are surfacing in clergy who are recently ordained.

Toward Improving the Selection Process Comparative research has never been done on the variety of selection processes currently employed among the various

religious bodies. Consequently, these various bodies have little if any shared information, and the opportunity is not present for sharing awareness and insights. Each body does things its own way. There seems to be very little data, if any, on the success-failure rates of screening procedures. Longitudinal studies of ministerial performance following admission to ministry according to stipulated criteria for selection simply do not appear in the literature. Since screening for ministry is done according to criteria established by individual religious bodies or denominations, and since there seems to be no consultation among the different bodies regarding this particular issue, it is difficult to discern whether or not there are some common objectives or standards that exist and might aid in a shared approach to the screening and evaluation of candidates for admission to the ordained ministry. While there are many other aspects of organized religious life that have been included in the past in ecumenical and interfaith discussions, screening for ministry seems never to have been one of these topics. Therefore, to suggest that there is a comprehensive screening protocol that could somehow or other be of service to the various religious bodies and denominations required to screen candidates for admission to the ordained ministry might be an innovative step. Risking the possibility of being presumptuous and perhaps appearing to meddle in other peoples' business, the following four- step protocol is offered for consideration and discussion by persons and agencies in various religious bodies and denominations who bear the responsibility for screening, evaluation, selection, and admission to the ordained ministry.

A. Psychological Testing and Evaluation Most religious organizations rely to one degree or another on psychological testing and evaluation as an aspect of screening. Frequently testing is done "to" the candidate for the purpose of providing someone or some agency with appropriate authority, a report that will help in making a decision to accept or reject the candidate. In some instances the candidate receives thorough and helpful feedback so that he or she truly benefits from being looked at through the perspective of a clinical (team) procedure. Meaningful feedback can be extremely helpful to the candidate and is to be encouraged as a normal part of the screening process. However, there are probably many instances in which a candidate is not provided with such an opportunity to be a participant in his/her own selection process. A second deficiency has sometimes been noted in that the specific goals in the testing are not clearly defined. The resulting data may tell what the psychologist is able to see, but some clinicians have complained that the religious body or denomination has not been clear about what exactly it needs to know about the person being examined. They do not seem to know for sure what they are looking for. Selecting the instruments and tests to be used in the evaluation is not the major problem. The primary requirement is to state what is needed to be learned about the person being examined so that a decision can be made as

to whether or not this person has the needed psychological assets to make effective ministry possible and whether or not within reasonable limits it can be predicted that this person will not fall victim to power abuse, sexual misconduct and other behaviors destructive to self, to others, to the system and to the community at large. Developing a comprehensive list of the desired traits and characteristics with a carefully stated rationale to guide the clinical evaluation is a major task requiring collaboration and careful study, and is beyond the scope of this paper. However, in order to gain some sense of what might be helpful and needed, the following list of nine desired traits and characteristics is offered primarily as a basis for discussion and much further study and development.

1. **EMPATHY:** a capacity for warmth generated by satisfactory relationships with parents and others of close and continuing association, reflecting a positive self-image; the absence of prevailing anger and hostility generated by nonacceptance and reflecting a low view of self.
2. **MATURITY:** balance and good judgment in which impulse life is subordinated to one's value system signifying the ability to defer gratification without frustration or conflict; the avoidance of being overly flexible or overly rigid thus reflecting significant personal insight.
3. **INNER CONTROL:** stability based on the possession of inner resources to fall back on under stress.
4. **SENSITIVITY TO EMOTIONS:** the capacity to accept the reality of emotions in self and hence in others; the absence of tendencies to be cold, impersonal and unresponsive.
5. **BALANCE OF REALITY WITH FANTASY:** availability of imaginal resources with accurate perception thus reflecting an adequate tie to reality; the absence of being a dreamer but with no way for testing reality.
6. **AMBITION:** a balanced and appropriate desire to succeed without evidence of a neurotic need to achieve in order to be recognized.
7. **PERSONAL VALUE SYSTEM:** evidence that values direct behavior and an ability to articulate the reasons (ie, the values involved) for doing what he/she does.
8. **SEXUAL UNDERSTANDING:** comfort in one's own sexual orientation and awareness and freedom from tendencies to act out, flirt, deny the importance of sexuality, and any forms of perversion.
9. **SELF-UNDERSTANDING:** in touch with self; aware of changes in mood and feelings and accepting such changes; not dominated by depression, guilt, anger or artificial euphoria.

Such traits and characteristics as may be desired must, of course, be viewed in conjunction with an individual's intellectual competence, skills, experience and capacity to learn. All of these factors need to be either included in or related to the process of psychological assessment and evaluation. Whatever psychological assessment is used, it is essential that the candidate be given the results of all testing and evaluation. Also it is important that this assessment be done as early as possible after a candidate has decided to "enter ministry." Any religious groups can have an assessment early on and another psychological assessment at least at one other stage. This assessment needs to have specific

recommendations to the candidate and to the appropriate ecclesiastical authorities. "Carefronting" at this stage is essential in the best interest of the candidate and the church at large.

B. Psycho-Sexual History Given the major issue that is calling for such a significant response generally in most religious systems throughout the world today, paying greater attention to the psycho-sexual history of persons being considered for admission to ministry is an absolute necessity. What this requires is a carefully structured personal interview conducted by a person skilled in the sexual sciences. Psychological testing may contribute something toward understanding the person's psycho-sexual history, but the structured interview with techniques being developed for the prediction of destructive and unacceptable sexual behaviors must be employed.

C. Background Referencing Only recently has background referencing been seen to be of value and useful. In the past it had been done quite informally in many instances, but recent experiences demonstrate that again and again it was never done at all. This procedure involves three important steps: 1. having each candidate supply a complete list of schools attended, positions held, and superiors (both secular and religious) who would have had responsibility for and knowledge about the person being referenced; 2. supplying to all persons and agencies on the list a questionnaire eliciting information about the person's background and any evidence of charges, allegations and disciplinary actions of any sort; 3. requiring the candidate to respond to a questionnaire of a similar nature with the understanding that where mandated by law the information supplied will be produced. Usually the candidate is expected to sign a statement authorizing the referencing process and releasing the religious body from liability and damages. A further addition to the process of gathering background information is to gather data about the individual's family life experience by employing the family genogram. This device is now becoming increasingly popular for a number of reasons. It is simply an easy and convenient way of mapping a three generational family story in order to see the role occupied by the candidate and the formative influences and experiences that have been present to him or her throughout one's life span. Background referencing adds costs and is time consuming but is an essential ingredient in a comprehensive selection protocol.

D. Collecting Critical Incidents Data A critical incident is a concrete experience in an individual's life which describes a specific success or possibly a particular failure. The rule of thumb here is that one of the best indicators of future behavior is past behavior. Providing information about critical incidents in one's own life allows the candidate to participate actively in the selection process. Inviting individuals to tell quite concretely about certain accomplishments in their own lives opens up interesting windows which reveal a great deal about how this person may behave in the future. The microcosm reveals the macrocosm. A critical incident story can be told by

answering such questions as: What happened and what were the results? What did you do to bring it about? Why was it meaningful to you? What activities did you most enjoy? What activity did you do best? Obviously the four-step comprehensive screening protocol outlined above produces a great deal of detailed information about a person; but in addition to generating data, it also engages the candidate in an extensive experience of reflection and self-study. Stretching over a longer period of time than in the past engages the participant in a process of scrutiny that can only be constructive. Screening is not done to the person, but rather with the person. This allows the deciding authority or authorities, as the case may be, to make a better informed decision, but it also allows the candidate to make a better informed decision about wanting or not wanting to be in the process. All parties are served.

Formation and Training While formation and training usually go on simultaneously in preparation for ministry, they are very distinct. Formation means encouraging growth and maturation. It focuses on personal development and the capacity for reflection and self-awareness. It is a psychological and spiritual process for which ample provision must be made. We might surmise that it is in this critical area that the deficiencies have occurred that have led to the misuse of power and the resulting sexual misconduct and other destructive behaviors that have been so costly to human beings and institutions. This is the point at which body and spirit become connected. The best training in the world cannot offset the failure to make this right connection between body and spirit. Training for ministry is the providing of knowledge and opportunities for skill development. Effective formation provides the context in which effective training can take place. Historically, a major gap in training in most religious bodies and denominations has to do with sexuality education. Graduate level training in sexuality education occurs in many colleges and universities but rarely in schools of theology, Bible colleges and seminaries. Such courses at the graduate level need to include teaching about psycho-sexual development, sexuality and intimacy, abuse and exploitation, boundary maintenance as an aspect of professional behavior, and the various sexuality-related issues which currently pose complex and challenging ethical problems in our society. Looming over all these issues are also attitudes about women. In order for ministry formation and training to be done better, more attention must be given to preparing and supporting the teachers and faculty members responsible for the development of candidates who are selected for admission to ministry. However, no matter how well improved screening and selection procedures may be, no matter how much effort goes into enhancing the formation and training provided, all that is needed cannot be accomplished in the pre-ordination experience. In the post-ordination years religious systems must do better in providing supervision, consultation, continuing education

and support to those whom they so carefully select for admission to the ordained ministry. DR