

Interfaith Sexual Trauma Institute Created at Saint John's

Roman Paur, Executive Director The Interfaith Sexual Trauma Institute is a creation of Saint John's Abbey and University with a national interdenominational leadership board of women and men who are victims, offenders, practitioners in the helping and legal professions, academics, writers and church leaders. ISTI is located on the Collegetown campus in 208 Wimmer Hall. In August, 1993, Abbot Timothy invited about two dozen prominent people from around the country to Collegetown to examine what Saint John's might do for its own sake and that of other communities of faith to face directly the emerging information about sexual misconduct in ministry and to influence constructively the reshaping of leadership culture among religious traditions. This meeting was on the recommendation of Br Dietrich Reinhart OSB, President, Saint John's University, and Abbot Primate Jerome Theisen OSB, following discussions with alumnus, Dr Patrick Carnes, who saw the need within churches to address systemic causes and pastoral issues of clergy sexual misconduct. In cooperation with significant initiatives of others, Br Dietrich recognized a key opportunity for service to the Church and society that could have a far-reaching positive impact on religious leadership. The Abbot asked this group to make recommendations to him for possible implementation by the Abbey and University. In his letter of commission, Abbot Timothy charged them "to foster specific creative, proactive approaches to promote healing, and to build when possible on any foundation stones that have already been set in place." The consultants arrived at three primary recommendations: 1) to establish a center or institute, 2) to create an ecumenical advisory board, and 3) to develop an internal process of learning and accountability. An organizational meeting was set for 2 May 1994. With the strong support of the University Board of Regents and the Collegetown Benedictine monastic community, this group became the board and the project was named "The Interfaith Sexual Trauma Institute." ISTI was underway with a focus on addressing issues of abuse of power and trust common among faith traditions. In August, 1994, Saint John's hosted The Linkup national conference. The board is deliberately made up of women and men, victims and offenders, advocates and church leaders, and professionals in health, law and education. The group is discovering it to be essential to learn anew how to sit with one another and create a respectful, supportive, non-judgmental environment as a paradigm of listening and understanding toward

healing and change. The experience of the ISTI board itself may prove to be a model for the goal of healing. "Saint John's is blessed to have such an energized board of dedicated people to work with us on this priority," said Abbot Timothy. The board is learning about power and control that both facilitate and inhibit, and about the experience of women in church structures and processes that are historically shaped and dominated by men. Such learning, burdened with the baggage and assumptions of institutional thinking, comes hard and slow but may enlighten attitudes that contribute to systemic failure. Current conflicts in resolving allegations often draw individuals and church leadership away from the Gospel through defensive and legal maneuvering that heighten the tensions between an appropriate pastoral response and protection of institutional interests. The first book with the ISTI imprint to be published by the Liturgical Press, Collegeville, is co-authored by a member of the board, Dr Mark Laaser, with Dr Nils Friberg, Bethel College, Minneapolis, entitled *Preventing Sexual Abuse: Clinical Signs for Educators*. A second ISTI book is also in process: board members Nancy Hopkins and Mark Laaser, (eds), *Healing the Soul of the Church*. The ISTI Publications Committee suggested two publishing ventures: a pastoral pamphlet series aimed at faith communities to assist the healing process and prevention; and a book series for educators, and health, clergy and legal professionals. Readers are invited to submit manuscripts for publication consideration to the Publications Committee at the ISTI address. A self-contained PC 3.5" ISTI resource diskette is available for \$12, featuring an extensive bibliography (nearly 2,000 select entries, also available in printed form), lists of victim organizations and programs, treatment centers, newsletters, etc. The ISTI board meets at Saint John's twice a year. RP