

The Institutional Response

Kevin McDonough is the vicar general for the archdiocese of Saint Paul / Minneapolis and a charter member of the ISTI board. This article is the fourth in a series of edited reports from the ISTI Discovery Conferences.

No other question generated more concern, anger, and hope among participants in the three ISTI conferences than the issue of institutional responses to sexual trauma. Conferees self-selecting their groups chose in large numbers to address their experiences with and ideas about leaders of organized religions especially at local and regional levels. Their heated discussions ranged from the practical to the highly theoretical. In spite of this range of approaches, however, there was wide agreement that denominational leaders are disappointingly slow to confront the scale and intensity of the pain for individuals, families, and congregations. The apparent inability of "the system" (in a variety of denominations and traditions) to respond effectively has led many ISTI conferees to conclude that "the system is the problem."

The initial experience of sexual betrayal by a leader within a faith community is a powerfully individual experience. While the power inequality which is misused in abusive and exploitative relationships involves a "public figure," victims are usually heartbreakingly willing to see the offense as the fault of one troubled individual. Even this realization namely, that someone other than the victim herself or himself is at fault - is often slow in dawning.

When the awareness that another has caused damage finally surfaces, victims often turn to the "church"-related people. These include family and local clergy as well as denominational officials. What they seek first and foremost is a listening ear. They hope the listener can in turn assist with making some sense out of the confusion which abuse and exploitation can generate. They ask that such listening and reflecting take place in a context of respect and prayer. They look to see that concrete protections for safety, their own as well as that of others, are being put in place. Where possible, they ask that some appropriate response be taken toward the offender.

In some cases, conferees indicated, those hopes have not been dashed, or at least not immediately. Some victims are met with respect and concern. This is not the usual case, however. Rather, their motives are impugned and the accuracy of their memories questioned. The embarrassment of those entrusted

with the story confirms for many victims their underlying shame at having been unable to prevent the horror: Was I really at fault after all? Implicitly or even explicitly, religious officials leave that question hanging over the head of the one traumatized.

Over time, something worse happens. All too often the initial distrust, denial, and blame shifting are followed by silence. The one who has brought forth painful information begins to see that those entrusted with the story wish he or she would go away. The silence takes on a life of its own. It appears to be a strategy, a deliberate choice, an act of commission rather than an unintentional omission.

The silence soon convinces the victim and those walking with him or her that there is some form of active collusion between institution and perpetrator. What initially appeared as the offense of an individual now becomes the manifestation of something deeper. Those who came to their religious organization seeking the repair of a damaged trust now find that the damage involves the organization itself.

It may be a sign of the generosity or the naivete of ISTI conferees that none suggested that an outright conspiracy exists between Church and offender. Such conspiracies including multi-offender sex 'rings' even involving denominational leaders - have been the subject of some speculation, and occasional verification, in other places. This was not what caught the attention of conference participants.

Rather, conferees saw the unresponsiveness of Church institutions as revelatory of deeper dysfunctions in leadership. Those dysfunctions not only block effective responses to particular cases of offense, but are seen as contributing to the continuation of an offense-tolerant environment. Several different diagnoses, with their concomitant strategies for change, were offered by conference participants.

Some pointed to fairly straightforward "managerial problems," which are to be corrected by a change of procedures. "...dare the woman inside you to be forgiven for judging herself too harshly and for convicting herself of a crime she did not commit...." Insufficient or wrongheaded church rules were cited, for example. --- Some high ranking people in leadership positions within the structures of religious traditions are not accustomed to working across "turf lines," or do not know how to get adequate expert assistance in designing a better pattern of response, or, worse yet, do not even think it appropriate.

Another diagnosis was that the subject of abuse and violence in the realm of sexuality is a frightening one for those in charge. This fear causes leadership to want to avoid reality: "the Church will simply deny that there is a problem, or they acknowledge that there is a problem, but they acknowledge that it is a small problem, when in reality it is a large one." The antidote suggested by more than a few conferees: let the Churches face the fear head-on.

A still deeper diagnosis suggests that religious value systems struggle with a certain perfectionism: 'One of the concerns of this organization is to appear good, to appear to have it all together, because that's the way we're going to do the most benefit, and so our response to the truth and reality of all this (sexual misconduct) is to hide it, to deny it.' To acknowledge that Church leadership is faulty would result, it is feared, in a loss of credibility for the whole Church. Its ability to be about its mission would be impeded. Over against such perfectionism one discussion group concluded that "with this matter of denial and pretending ... we need to humble ourselves."

For some participants all of this points out that the Churches are "closed systems." One conferee suggested that "the Church ... is a very closed system, so it's hard for information to get out, and it's hard for information to come in." Such systems are self-validating, claiming to contain all that they need within. Information from "the outside" never really penetrates the consciousness of 'insiders, or is immediately dismissed as distorted or irrelevant if it does. Sustained attempts to bring in new information are met with defensiveness; the wagons are circled ever more closely. Against such self-defeating self-enclosure, some conferees proposed the importance of openness by the faith traditions to the give and take of societal interchange: "social pressure and expectation ... the openness of our discussion, we're hoping, leads to a change."

Although much of the conferee discussion pointed to painful cases of Church nonresponsiveness, there were also moments of hope. One participant, for example, described a two-year-long process of facing a particular clergy misconduct case which was "a strengthening, cleansing, healing process for the whole institution, for the people." It was marked by public disclosure, even before matters were able to be fully resolved by internal Church procedures. "Victims also have a sense of their reality being somehow validated," the speaker noted.

Another participant saw positive results to a more open attitude which extended beyond offenses by the clergy. By addressing publicly the reality of sexual trauma, inflicted by many different kinds of people, one congregation

has "found people, both perpetrators and victims, who were able to come forward and say, "Help me, here is my pain, here is my problem."

In such cases the Church is no longer merely the place where one individual offends against another, and it certainly is not a collusive part of an offense-tolerant, offense-generating environment. It actually becomes an active element in responding to sexual trauma. The religious organization becomes a place in which the trauma is transformed in some powerful way: "healed," "redeemed," "made into an occasion for grace to work."

The experiences and testimony of conferees point to several key elements of an agenda for change in the Churches. It is essential, they suggest, that Church leadership be "permeable" to the kind of painful, fearful information that abuse and exploitation stories contain. Unless the information is received and examined, it cannot be responded to. Churches have to develop ways to show that the information is in fact being received: by the use of advocates, for example, and through regular communication with victims.

Furthermore, there should be predictable patterns of response to complaints that are received, and those patterns have to be something other than denial-minimization-blameshifting. Policies and/or procedures that are made public ahead of time give all involved a sense that equity and justice are at the fore of the Churches' concern. They help victims understand the complexity of the processes that their stories have set off, and give them a sense that "something is happening."

Leaders should learn to trust, participants said, that the people of the Churches are for the most part quite able to handle the imperfections of their clergy, if and when their failings are publicly and nondefensively acknowledged. There was a powerful call for spiritual renewal from many conferees: that fear be overcome by trust, that half-truth give way to honesty, and that humility replace perfectionism.

In such an environment, Church leaders must expect and welcome public accountability. One speaker noted: "All the issues, everything should be put out in public disclosure, as grist for the mill, so that it can all be examined, so that there are no secrets." Participants made it clear that the Churches are not "starting fresh" on this issue, but rather must battle a history that leads even well-disposed observers to a certain skepticism. Leaders must therefore anticipate having to apologize for past mistakes: "the original apology ... where the Church says 'we were wrong.'" Acknowledging inadequate organizational

responses in the past may be the first and most important step in creating new, more effective responses, and winning public trust for them. KM