

# The Next Step: Keep on Going!

Elisabeth A Horst The ISTI Sun, V3N2, April 1997 Elisabeth A Horst, PhD, is a licensed psychologist practicing in Minneapolis, and a member of the ISTI Board. What are the Churches doing these days about clergy sexual misconduct? What should they be doing? Is there still a problem? Have things settled down, or is there more work to be done? At a recent meeting, members of the ISTI Board discussed findings of an informal survey we had conducted to assess the current state of the issue. Most of the respondents reported that official policies regarding sexual misconduct have been adopted within the Church body to which they belong. Most also reported that they felt such policies were being enforced. This is good news indeed. We've run the first mile of the marathon. Still, for those of us committed to making real changes, it is not yet time to relax. The hardest work is just about to begin. Some of the people interviewed seemed to conclude that because the rules are in place, the church has dealt with the problem. Certainly, we all wish this were the case. Unfortunately, assuming that rules will take care of the problems associated with sexual trauma in communities of faith is like assuming that the abolition of slavery took care of the problem associated with racism. It's easier to establish rules than to change the attitudes and practices that make the rules necessary. It's easier to change laws barring women from specific jobs than to achieve parity in the workplace. It's easier to forbid sexual relationships between people of unequal power than it is to prevent the real damage done by power abuse. Believing that the rules take care of the problem is optimistic, but not realistic. Where does this hopeful, but faulty, belief come from? The urge to do something about clergy sexual misconduct comes from a desire for justice. It comes from all that is best in us, from concern for the victims and the sincere intention to live out our faith with integrity. But the pressure to deal with the issue definitively, to do something quickly and then be done with it, suggests darker motives. We wouldn't need to close the door so quickly if there weren't monsters lurking behind it -- monsters with names like Fear and Shame and Change. Those bad feelings are fickle motivators. The discomfort they cause prompts speedy action but can hinder sustained effort. In the short term, if we let it, shame can signal that we aren't living up to our own standards and nudge us back into line. But it takes more than a nudge, more than a quick adjustment, to deal with an issue of this scope. Staying with the process means opening the door to our shame and fear again and again. I am writing this in the midst of a winter that has been harsh even by Minnesota standards, so I've had a lot of experience lately in doing what has to be done

even when the weather is hostile to human life. It is not fun, and doesn't get all that much easier over time, either. The urge to get back inside where it's warm is simply instinctive. It's painful either to move or to stand still. It even hurts to breathe. No matter how urgently you need to start the car, shovel the walk, get yourself to work, your body just keeps telling you to hurry up and get out of the cold. Staying with the issues related to clergy sexual misconduct long enough to do the necessary work is about as much fun as taking a walk outside when it's twenty below and the wind is blowing. It means looking clearly at the faults of the religious systems we love and rely on. It's uncomfortable, even dangerous, work to reconsider everything. The quick way back to comfort is to defend against shame and fear, to try to keep from feeling the bad feelings rather than to allow ourselves to learn from them. It's getting harder to get away with blaming the victim, although that strategy still persists. But if that one fails, there are plenty of others to try. Denial, for instance. If you really want to avoid feeling pain about sexual abuse you can convince yourself, contrary to the evidence of your own eyes and ears, that it isn't happening. When the pastor showed you the box of condoms in his desk, it wasn't really inappropriate. When the eight year old girl used sexually explicit language in her Sunday School Class, it didn't really mean anything. Or, you can withdraw from the discussion entirely. Sexual abuse? We dealt with that. Let's look at what we're doing in overseas missions. Let's talk about re-paving the parking lot. Slipping into the comfortable belief that the rules are enough is a way to deny the scope of the issue and withdraw from the chilly work of bringing about real change. Now that the rules are by and large in place, we do at least have a foundation on which to build. Technically, it is okay for a victim to speak up. Officially, she has grounds for complaint and a place to report it. But in my therapy office those who have been victimized still return again and again to the question of whether they were at fault. They can't believe they weren't somehow to blame, and in their daily lives they encounter too many people who are ready to agree with them. Speaking up involves not only working through their own self-blame but also the extra burden of educating people around them. Until we accomplish the next step in the process, until we build a more just system, it will not be safe for victims to speak up, no matter what the rules say. The next step involves undoing the attitudes and practices that support sexual exploitation. If we really intend to do something about clergy sexual misconduct we have to look at the confluence of gender, power and sexuality in religion. We must see the connections between sexual trauma and business as usual in the church. The attitudes and beliefs that do the damage are so much part of our religious culture that they are generally accepted not only as truth but as the standard for moral behavior. Religious bodies maintain a status quo that still assigns power by gender, still protects the illusion that clergy are morally better than the rest of us, still presents real

confusion about what it means to be sexually responsible. We have inherited a religious culture in which certain kinds of harm that we do to one another are invisible. The work before us is to make them visible so that we can begin to undo them. There is one kind of power abuse that happens when one person holds a gun to another person's head, and another far less visible kind in which one person goes along with what she assumes another person wants because she has been trained to do so. In our culture we have all been taught to assume that men deserve a certain kind of treatment from women, and in our Churches we are used to granting authority to clergy. Rules handle the overt kind of abuse of power pretty well, but they can't do much about the more covert kind. I suppose somewhere there probably has been a case in which a minister told the music director directly that she would lose her job if she didn't sleep with him, but the stories of power abuse that I have heard have all involved a much more subtle approach. The minister walks in the office and says, "Don't we have any coffee?" The music director, cringing a bit, drops her sheet music on the copy machine and goes to fill the coffee pot. If the minister gradually escalates this kind of "non-request request" to sexual advances, the music director may simply go along. You don't have to threaten when someone is already convinced she is supposed to attend to your needs and ignore her own. It's nearly impossible to enforce the rules when no one, including the victim, can really see the problem. We can only change these pervasive habits of hierarchy if we are willing to undo our assumptions and practice new behaviors. This work requires the kind of humility that comes only from enormous strength of character. It requires us to walk deliberately and with courage out into that painful deep freeze where we question all that we thought we had already learned. At a dinner party this week, I mentioned hearing a sexist remark in a sermon. Later, a friend asked me to explain exactly what it was about the remark that I found sexist. He was not asking me to defend myself; he was trying to understand. He had decided to bundle up and head out into the cold. The interesting thing was that he made it look more like an adventure than a painfully unpleasant experience. If enough of us are willing to develop that kind of attitude, this just might turn out to be the kind of adventure that leads us into a whole new world. A sexually enlightened and just Church may seem like an impossible dream, but we have made radical changes before. Less than a hundred years ago, women were not allowed to vote. This year politicians running for national office worried over whether they could appeal to "soccer moms." Rule changes can indeed start radical transformations in attitudes. Maybe in another hundred years we will no longer need bumper stickers that read, "I believe Anita Hill." EH

