

Survivors champion need to speak out about abuse

Heidi Schlumpf | Aug. 19, 2010



CHICAGO -- When little Stevie Theisen was in the fourth grade in Dubuque, Iowa, classmates used to tease that he was "teacher's pet." If they only knew.

While he was staying after school to clean the blackboard and help "Sister," she was taking advantage of her 9-year-old student, Theisen says.

"First she taught me how the Eskimos kiss, rubbing noses. Then she taught me how the Americans kiss. And then she taught me how the French kissed, by sticking her tongue in my mouth," Theisen told the national conference of Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, known as SNAP, held July 30-Aug. 1 in Chicago.

Survivors sharing their stories at the conference were not always what the public has come to see as the "typical" victim of clergy sexual abuse. Among those speaking up were not only victims of abuse by nuns, but also female victims, including vulnerable adults, and those abused since the sex abuse crisis became public in the 1980s.

Theisen is one of a growing number of victims speaking out about their sexual abuse at the hands of a surprising group -- nuns and women religious.

"A lot of people don't believe females are capable of sexual abuse," said Theisen, director of the Iowa chapter of SNAP. "But who had more access to children back then?"

According to the Bishop Accountability Web site (www.bishopaccountability.org), about 75 nuns have been accused of sexually abusing minors. A 2007 study by Kaiser Permanente in collaboration with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that 40 percent of cases of sexual abuse with a male victim involve female abusers.

Like their fellow victims of priest predators, those abused by nuns often feel re-victimized when trying to get justice from the church.

In 2004, Theisen took his case to the Dubuque archdiocesan review board, which ruled his case "not sustained" due to insufficient evidence, even though an archdiocesan investigator found Theisen's allegations credible. His

alleged abuser, who is elderly and in retirement, has denied the allegations.

That same year, Theisen and other victims of abuse by nuns approached the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, which represents about 95 percent of women religious in the United States, with a list of requests, including the opportunity for survivors to speak to the group's national conference. That request has been denied.

"We don't believe it's the proper venue for that," said Sr. Annmarie Sanders, the Leadership Conference's communications director and a board member of *NCR*. "But that doesn't mean LCWR hasn't done a lot to address the issue."

The Leadership Conference has provided an inventory to evaluate policies and procedures, as well as educational materials about sexual abuse to its member congregations, Sanders said. The conference does not have the authority to discipline congregations, though it does "stress that its members and their congregations make every effort possible to prevent all sexual exploitation of children and young people," says a Leadership Conference statement.

But survivors say that telling their stories publicly, at the LCWR national gathering or elsewhere, is critical, not only to educate others but for their own healing. "Very simply, child-molesting clerics cannot be identified, suspended, charged, sued and locked up unless people like us speak up," said David Clohessy, SNAP's executive director. "And we don't even begin to get better until we speak up."

Joelle Casteix was sexually abused and became pregnant by her choir director at a Catholic high school in Southern California, but for years didn't believe she was a victim "because I was a girl."

"Everyone told me it was my fault, so it must have been my fault," said Casteix, SNAP's Western regional director. She was invited to serve on the lay review board for the Orange, Calif., diocese, but quit when she realized the board was "a puppet show for the bishop," she said.

Female victims of sexual abuse are less likely to come forward, according to Patrick Wall, a canon lawyer and former Benedictine monk who has become a survivors' advocate. "The vast majority [of abusing priests] were heterosexual with developmental issues [that made them] like 16-year-olds psychologically," he said. "So that's the girls they went for."

Other priests prey on adults who are vulnerable because they have been abused before or because they have come to priests for counsel at a time of crisis.

That was the case with Pat Bond, who confided in a priest that she had been sexually abused by her father and that her marriage was falling apart. "I sought help from a Catholic priest because they're the good guys, and I told him my deepest, darkest secrets," Bond said. "But I traded one father for another."

When Bond became pregnant, the priest suggested an abortion and offered no emotional or financial support, she said. His Franciscan order only paid child support begrudgingly and required her to sign a gag order, which she broke when she and her son were fighting cancer last year. Nathan, 22, died in December.

"We are the 'consenting adults,' therefore you don't hear from us," she said through tears at the SNAP conference.

As many as 30 percent of Catholic priests have been involved in sexual relationships with women, according to a 1990 study by A.W. Richard Sipe, a mental health counselor and former Benedictine priest. Good Tidings, a support group for women sexually involved with priests, reports that more than 2,000 women have contacted

their offices.

Although some of the nearly 300 survivors and their supporters at this year's SNAP conference have been involved since the organization was founded in 1988, others were just suffering their abuse around that time.

Shawn Plocher says he was in the eighth grade in a small town near Minneapolis in 1986 when an interim parish priest fondled and attempted to rape him in a church basement. He had come to the priest for solace after his grandmother had died. To repress the memories and numb the pain, Plocher began drinking and spent most of his teenage and young adult years in and out of rehab and jail.

It wasn't until he heard other victims telling their stories that he was able to admit what had happened to him. His memories were confirmed by grade-school friends, a therapist who had treated one of the priest's other victims, and even the archdiocesan victims' advocate. Unable to file criminal charges because of the age of the case and lack of physical evidence, Plocher reached a settlement with the Minneapolis archdiocese that has helped pay for his therapy.

"I still struggle with everyday life, but it has gotten better," said Plocher, who was attending his first SNAP conference with his parents. "There are now more good days than bad days at this point in my life."

Barbara Blaine, SNAP founder and president, says the organization is hearing from newer victims from abuse that happened in the 1980s and '90s. "The average age a victim speaks up is 42," she said.

Plocher lost his career, his home and his fiancée as a result of the destructive behavior that followed the abuse. He also lost his belief in the God of his childhood. "The God I knew growing up was represented by the man who abused me," he said. "I now have a new belief in a higher power that I know as God."

A majority of sex offenders -- not just priests -- use religion to justify their abuse, said Victor Vieth, a former prosecutor who now trains law enforcement officials about the spiritual damage done by child sexual abuse.

But spirituality can also help victims heal, he said. "The faith community needs to give more than platitudes to [victims] who are struggling with these spiritual questions."

[Heidi Schlumpf is a regular *NCR* contributor.]

Victims' group goes global

The globe on the banner behind the speaker's podium wasn't the only evidence at the national conference of the Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests that the clerical sex abuse victims' movement has gone global. There were speakers from Belgium and England, reports from SNAP representatives' trips to Europe, and plenty of talk about how "all roads lead to Rome," as the title of one session put it.

"This is not a U.S. or European crisis," said SNAP's founder, Barbara Blaine. "We're hearing from victims across the globe."

Survivors in Germany, Brazil, and even Pakistan have contacted SNAP's offices wanting to follow its lead, organizers said. "For 22 years, we have focused on 4 percent of the world," SNAP executive director David Clohessy said, referring to the U.S. share of the world's population. "Now we're focusing on abuse and cover-up literally worldwide."

International speakers expressed the desire to network with other survivor groups.

In reviewing the year, speakers named as victories the new statute of limitations law in Florida, various

convictions and settlements, the release of new information in Los Angeles and Wisconsin, and the increasing vulnerability of bishops and even the Vatican.

Victims' attorney Jeffery Anderson, who has filed a lawsuit against the Vatican, said he believes the movement is at a tipping point. The crisis is now worldwide, and at the top is the current pope and his predecessors, he said. "Together we are prepared to prove it, both in the court of public opinion and in the crucible of the courtroom, if and when we get the chance."

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