

Team strives to stop the hurting from abuse by priests

By Mary Rueter
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The instinct in rural communities when someone is hurting is to step forward and try to help, says deacon Mike Sheil.

Thus, the small SS Philip and James Catholic Parish in Grand Mound is taking steps to reach out to all who are hurting as the result of sexual abuse by priests of the Davenport Diocese, and more particularly by the Rev. James Janssen, who served the parish for 10 years from 1980 to 1990.

Janssen is a defendant in many of the 18 lawsuits filed against the Davenport Diocese, alleging sexual abuse against young boys.

For the Grand Mound church, the hurt is personal. At least one of the plaintiffs — Don Green of DeWitt — is a member of the parish. Others — who have filed suits anonymously and are known as “John Does” — also may be from SS Philip and James.

Green has allowed his name to be made public, however, and the outpouring of support from the parish has been overwhelming at times.

“It is a testimony of faith to see Don every day, practicing his faith, and to know he is

such a strong member of the church, says Lisa Fox, a member of the parish council.

Fox has been instrumental in rallying the parish behind Green and other survivors of sexual abuse as they face not only court proceedings but simply dealing with life on a day-to-day basis.

Under the leadership of the parish council, a spiritual healing team has formed to help provide that support. Announcements in the church bulletin invited interested persons to participate, and the response has been excellent with each meeting attracting about 25 people. The group includes members in all age groups and life situations and also involves several people from outside the parish.

Ann Green, one of the leaders of the spiritual healing team and the wife of Don Green, explains the local team agrees with the goals that were developed by Voice of the Faithful, a similar group in Boston: To support survivors; to support priests of integrity; and to create structural change within the church.

"We're not attempting to change church doctrine," Green clarifies, "but to change the hierarchy of the church," which, in the Davenport Diocese, has been largely unresponsive to the men who have come forward alleging abuse.

"We're trying to be heard," says Sheil, a deacon in the neighboring St. Joseph Parish, DeWitt.

Sheil says with declining numbers of priests, there is a real need to get lay people involved in the church, and leave the sacraments and doctrine to the priesthood. Laity needs to know more about what is going on within the church, he says, but change is a slow process.

"The power is with the money," Sheil explains. All decisions stop with the priest. "We need good, quality people to step forward and share their expertise on issues such as financial matters," he believes.

Moreover, Sheil says, "Priests need to talk about God; they don't need to be in politics. The church is the biggest political organization that lives."

While changing the structure of the church may take decades, there is much that can be done in the meantime.

Mary Ann Schanze, a member of the spiritual healing team, notes in its first few months of activity, representatives already have sat in on a court hearing to give support to the survivors and are planning a

healing Mass to provide a sense of hope.

"We want to reach out (through the Mass) to the parishes and survivors who have come forward," she said. "It may take time. We want to do it right."

The group also is planning a show of support Friday, July 30, at the Scott County Courthouse, when a hearing involving John Doe I-A will be held at 9 a.m. The Davenport Diocese intends to show why his case should be dismissed. The argument is based on Freedom of Religion, and attorneys for the diocese will argue information about priests who are accused of being sex offenders should be protected by the church.

Members of the spiritual healing team will be wearing white ribbons with medals in the shape of a cross with a dove inscribed on them as a symbol of unity.

They encourage others to attend the hearing as well, and they request prayers — from all denominations — from those who are unable to attend.

The team members who attended the previous hearing were astounded at the information that came out.

"I read the affidavits (describing in vivid detail some of the sexual exploitation and other immoral acts Janssen is accused of)," Schanze says, "but I still am in shock about the power of the hierarchy" to conceal that information.

"(The bishops and other high-ranking officials of the diocese) feel omnipotent and have no need to justify their actions" in covering up and disregarding the accusations when they were reported — in some cases, years ago.

The documentation is damning, the team agrees. Several copies of the documents — Resistance to Summary Judgment regarding James Wells and John Doe III) — are circulating throughout the parish. There is a waiting list to read the 250 or so pages of affidavits and other information.

"I was amazed to learn under canon law (the hierarchy) can keep those secrets," Bonnie Campbell said.

Barb Morrissey observes one of the most distressing things for her as a person and as a Catholic is that from second grade catechism on, she was taught to be morally correct. "The word was constantly was tossed about," she says. "I was very conscious of it."

"No matter what legal basis there is, our diocese has a moral obligation to inform the parishes (of the allegations against their priests). Today the Church talks about the

'moral obligation' to support certain political candidates. Where was that moral obligation 10, 20, 40 years ago? And what has happened because it was neglected?"

Mary Kloewer wonders why morality does not apply equally to parishioners and clergy. "The scandal has brought shame to the Catholic Church. We want (the hierarchy) to be responsible and reach out with mercy and compassion."

The parish also is dismayed by The Catholic Messenger's coverage of the issue of abuse by priests. "It's been a real eye-opener to discover it's a paper for the bishop," says Arlene McClimon.

Not only has The Messenger not acknowledged the spiritual healing team, but the reports of abuse it does print are one-sided. "Nowhere are they trying to be a voice for laity who are hurting and seeking help," Ann Green says.

Diana Scott echoes Green's comments. "The diocese has not reached out to victims — nor to the parish, except through correspondence which is meaningless, empty words.

"We wrote the bishop and waited for a response. It came through our church bulletin. We waited and waited, but nothing was done." So the parish council moved ahead to the next step, Scott explains.

"We all are hurting in different ways. Survivors have asked for help and other people have come forward, but we're still waiting for the diocese."

Meanwhile, members of the spiritual healing team have a direct interest in healing the church, and indirectly, in healing themselves.

The inaction of the diocese has affected their faith in different ways, but none of the team members indicates an interest in walking away from the church.

In fact, Scott says the whole issue has made her faith stronger as she turns to scripture. "I've never thought of leaving (the church), but I have no faith in the hierarchy," she says.

Morrissey agrees her faith is not daunted but her religious convictions are affected.

Natalie Regan says her religion is not impaired in any way, but she is very disappointed in the church's lack of action. "We looked up to (Janssen), and he let us down."

"We had a childhood faith with a lot of innocence," Scott notes. "It's hard to let that go."

And so, the healing team from Grand Mound goes about its business.

"Our greatest hope," says Father David Brownfield, a priest currently assigned to SS Philip and James Church, "is that a child is never abused in our community again."

"Our hope is we can contact legislators to change the law on the statute of limitations," adds Vic Green. (Because of the nature of the crime, many victims have suppressed the knowledge of what was done to them, and it comes out many years later, often during counseling.)

Morrissey says her hope is to see victims not be afraid to come forward, while McClimon says she would like to see the church become a church of the people. "Vatican II made that point, but it never has been followed," she points out.

Ann Green says she would like to see the Davenport Diocese deal with the accused priests differently. In other locales, priests accused of abuse are not housed on diocese property nor are they supported by diocese money.

"A lot of people have left the church," Kloewer observes. "We, as Catholics, want to welcome them back."

Other towns and parishes have gotten wind of the Grand Mound parish's activities. "We can't foresee where this will go," Morrissey says, "but it will go farther than the Diocese of Davenport. We need to do it right."

Still, says Fox, there is no road map or set of written directions on how to proceed.

"Openness and transparency are where we need to go, but it is difficult because there is a change in mindset. It is not of the nature of the Catholic Church to deal with it," Fox adds.

"We have to defend why we keep talking about this. The church will survive. There will be transparency and openness. We need to keep providing information to people who can make a difference — that's part of our purpose."

"The system needs to change," Father Brownfield agrees. "This is painful to the church. A decade ago, it was painful to the Boy Scouts, but there must be changes in society to keep children safe.

"What hurts me most is spending my life helping young people be productive members of society (and seeing) child abuse goes against all that," the priest laments. "It is a total destruction of our future."

Brownfield encourages victims of abuse to come forward. "We're waiting for them. We know who some are, but until they are ready to come forward, we respect their privacy."

"It's more important for them to know who we are than for us to know them," Fox adds.