

All faiths question handling of abuse

Debate over celibacy as factor is rancorous

By Michael Paulson, Globe Staff, 3/13/2002

The scourge of clergy sexual abuse has afflicted virtually every religious denomination: In recent years rabbis, ministers, and gurus have all been charged with molesting children.

Hare Krishna temples are filing for bankruptcy because of the anticipated cost of settling abuse litigation, and the Jehovah's Witnesses are facing a first round of lawsuits.

But the Catholic Church has been hit with many more allegations of clergy sexual abuse than any other faith or denomination.

"There are absolutely no Protestant equivalents," said Anson D. Shupe, a professor of sociology at Indiana University-Purdue University in Fort Wayne who researches clergy misconduct. "If I could find some spectacular cases, that would help my career, but I can't. You don't have rapacious serial predators, and the Protestant establishment doesn't tolerate it the way the Catholic establishment has."

Shupe's view is widely, but not universally, held among

scholars of clergy sexual abuse. And the statistics seem clear: The Archdiocese of Boston says at least 80 priests have been accused of child sexual abuse over the last 50 years, and scholars say as many as 2,000 priests have been accused nationwide.

By contrast, Protestant and non-Christian denominations have had so few reported cases that their leaders can generally count them on one hand. A 1999 study of clergy misconduct, in which academics with the Hartford Institute for Religion Research spoke with 76 ministers who had, over the last 40 years, served 532 different congregations in 14 different denominations, turned up no instances of sexual abuse of children in the Protestant congregations studied.

There are no comprehensive quantitative studies of clergy sexual abuse, according to David Finkelhor, director of the Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire and a member of Cardinal Bernard F. Law's committee on sexual abuse. Finkelhor says there is no rigorous research comparing clergy abuse rates by denomination, nor are there reliable statistics analyzing whether clergy are more likely to abuse children than teachers, scouting leaders, ice cream truck drivers, or any other group with easy access to children.

The Catholic Church itself has not undertaken any study of the prevalence of child sexual abuse among clergy, and Cardinal Bernard F. Law said earlier this year that he does not know whether priests are more likely to abuse

children than others.

"The Catholic hierarchy has stonewalled any attempts to do any kind of study on this issue, and they've had offers to do it," said Rev. Thomas P. Doyle, a Catholic Air Force chaplain, who, as a canon lawyer working at the Vatican Embassy in Washington in 1985, wrote a report on the problem of clergy sexual abuse that he says was ignored by the bishops.

But one researcher, sociologist Philip Jenkins of Pennsylvania State University, argues that the Catholic Church is being unfairly tarred as a result of "religious bigotry."

"My research of cases over the past 20 years indicates no evidence whatever that Catholic or other celibate clergy are any more likely to be involved in misconduct or abuse than clergy of any other denomination - or indeed, than nonclergy," Jenkins wrote in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. "However determined news media may be to see this affair as a crisis of celibacy, the charge is just unsupported."

But, as diocese after diocese around the United States acknowledges that it has employed multiple priests accused of molesting children over the last several decades - the contrast with other denominations seems to be growing.

The United Church of Christ, which is the largest Protestant denomination in Massachusetts, has had three clergy accused of sexual abuse of children over the last 50 years in Massachusetts, according to Rev. Nancy S. Taylor, president of the denomination's state conference. The denomination

defrocked all three ministers, and two were sent to jail - a contrast to the situation in the Catholic Church, which in the past did not report allegations of abuse to law enforcement and often sent accused clergy to treatment, then either reassigned them or placed them on paid leave.

The Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts, another large denomination, has also had only three cases in memory, according to spokesman Ken Arnold. Two of the accused priests were jailed, Arnold said, and one was defrocked.

The Boston-based Unitarian Universalist Association has had just one minister accused of child sexual abuse over the last 50 years in Massachusetts, and he too was defrocked by the denomination and eventually convicted, according to John Hurley, the denomination's spokesman.

And the Rev. Rebecca Bourret, associate to the bishop of the New England Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, said she can think of no local cases of clergy sexual abuse of a child.

The American Baptist Churches of Massachusetts has also had just one case, and that minister was also sent to prison, according to executive minister Rev. Linda C. Spoolstra.

"Child abuse among clergy has not been a major issue for us," Spoolstra said. "We have been much more concerned about sexual abuse of clergy with adults because there have been more violations of ethical behavior in this area."

And the Greek Orthodox Diocese of Boston has had just one recent known case of child sexual abuse, according to

Metropolitan Methodios, the presiding hierarch. In that case, a third-generation Vermont priest, the Rev. Emmanuel Koveos, was convicted of fondling a 12-year-old girl; in 1999, Methodios prevailed upon the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople to expel Koveos from the priesthood.

"We tend to deal with it directly, and not scandalize it," Methodios said. "We feel that a priest has to be suspended, whether he is guilty or not, until a full investigation takes place, and if there is anything to the allegations, he is dismissed and defrocked."

Researchers are unclear on the reasons behind the numbers of abuse cases among priests.

Many church critics immediately seize upon the most obvious difference between Catholic priests and other clergy: Priests are supposed to be celibate. Critics argue that the requirement for celibacy draws sexual deviants into the priesthood, and leaves priests no acceptable alternatives for their sexual desires.

But Finkelhor, the University of New Hampshire expert, says researchers would have to consider several other possible explanations.

For example, he says, it is possible that income or education are factors. He theorizes that socially disadvantaged children might feel less empowered to challenge abusers and less confident that any complaints will be heard by the church or police.

Another possible explanation, Finkelhor said, is that priests

are more able to abuse children because of the extraordinary amount of authority and reverence they enjoy within the Catholic Church. Protestant and Jewish clergy are generally less powerful within their congregations, and can often be fired by laypeople.

Priests also may have more access to children, and to places in which to abuse them, than other clergy, Finkehor said. Many priests live in rectories, which directly adjoin churches, and they sometimes have more involvement with children than other clergy. Most Protestant denominations, for example, do not have child altar servers.

Of course, the non-Catholic denominations are all smaller than the Catholic Church, and none has been exposed to the same extraordinary level of scrutiny, which might reveal some previously unknown cases.

And non-Catholic denominations have their own problems.

Many struggle with clergy who get sexually involved with adult congregants, which in some cases is legally permissible but is considered to be a moral taboo. In one case, a Cherry Hill, N.J., rabbi is now awaiting retrial on charges that in 1994 he hired killers to bludgeon his wife to death so he could continue having an affair with a radio talk show host.

Sexual relationships with adults are an issue for Catholic clergy too. Despite their vow of celibacy, some Catholic priests have sexual relationships with adult men or women, according to researchers.

Many denominations also struggle with financial wrongdoing,

a problem that is particularly acute among Protestant clergy, according to Shupe, the Indiana sociologist.

The only non-Catholic denomination that has been plagued with allegations of widespread child sexual abuse is the Hare Krishna movement, a small Hindu-like sect. Scores of people have alleged that they were sexually abused as children at Hare Krishna boarding schools in the 1970s and 1980s.

But the Hare Krishnas have been far more open than the Catholic Church in responding to the crisis, which has forced a number of Hare Krishna temples into bankruptcy. The Hindu sect published a detailed expose of its own wrongdoing, written by a Middlebury College sociologist, in its official journal in 1998; a year earlier it had set up a child protection office to investigate and report to authorities instances of child abuse.

Another denomination that experienced an instance of clergy sexual abuse in 2000, but then took steps toward openness, is Orthodox Judaism. The Orthodox Union, which represents Orthodox rabbis, acted against Rabbi Baruch Lanner only after a newspaper, Jewish Week, reported that Lanner, a top official in Orthodoxy's youth movement, had been accused of harassing and molesting scores of youth group teenagers over three decades.

But the revelation about Lanner led not only to the rabbi's indictment, but also to the resignation of his supervisor, the executive vice president of the Orthodox Union, and then the Orthodox Union appointed a commission to investigate. That

group found that leaders of the Orthodox Union "made profound errors of judgment in their handling of Lanner throughout his career."

In the wake of the scandal that is roiling the Catholic Church, some faith groups are hurriedly reassessing their own policies and procedures. The Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, for example, is writing a new sexual abuse policy. In Massachusetts, the United Church of Christ and the Episcopal Church have sent warnings to clergy, reminding them that they are expected to report any allegations of sexual abuse to the state - even though it's not required by law.

"We are working hard to raise the consciousness of all our people that this is critically important to our life together as a Conference of Churches," said Taylor, the UCC conference minister.

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