

2-27-08 - National view: Shedding light on abusers is key to protecting children

Kristine Ward, Duluth News Tribune (MN)

To heal the wounded and protect the vulnerable.” That is the mission of a sometimes controversial, mainly volunteer-led support group called SNAP, or the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests. I have known of, supported, and followed SNAP’s work for years.

Sometimes SNAP gets criticized for helping to expose credibly accused child molesters who haven’t been formally sued, suspended or charged. I understand such criticism. Sometimes SNAP gets blasted for helping to expose alleged sexual predators whose cases — whether criminal, civil or canonical — haven’t yet been finally resolved. That’s somewhat understandable.

But I’ve never seen SNAP get attacked for shedding light on the whereabouts or activities of convicted child-molesting clergymen, especially when those men used religious titles and positions to hurt children and still have religious titles and positions. Not until the News Tribune’s Feb. 13 editorial, “Little gained by exposing abusers on sex offender list.”

So I thought long and hard when some questioned SNAP’s recent, low-key news conference alerting Minnesota citizens about two admitted predators who remain active in the Episcopalian church. I applaud what the organization has done in this instance to warn unsuspecting families about these two potentially threatening sex offenders.

One is Lynn Bauman, a defrocked Episcopalian priest. In the 1990s, he molested one boy and was accused of molesting two others on spiritual retreats he led in Texas. These days, despite his conviction, Bauman leads spiritual retreats in Minnesota. He’s scheduled to direct at least three more this year, and the state Episcopal bishop insists he won’t prevent this from happening.

The other is Mark Makowski, a suspended Duluth Catholic priest. An Episcopal Web site and church official indicate that Makowski holds an elected lay position in the statewide Episcopal diocese.

Both men admit having perpetrated sex crimes against kids. Both have been forced to register as sex offenders. Both find their original employers don’t want them back. Both, however, clearly are being welcomed in leadership positions by Episcopalian Bishop James Jelinek.

Admittedly, things could be worse. Both could be full-time employees of the diocese working in daily contact with children. It doesn’t seem like that’s the case.

Still, this seems unnecessarily perilous. Bauman and Makowski clearly took advantage of their religious roles and affiliations in one place to gain access to kids and hurt them. Now they’ve both gotten more religious roles and affiliations and have moved elsewhere — to communities where few are aware of their crimes. This seems like a recipe for disaster.

Shedding light on the presence and roles of these two men so that parents might be vigilant and children might be safeguarded was laudable.

One also should look beyond the particulars of these two predators and understand SNAP’s motivations in a broader sense. I know the group’s leaders want to deter future recklessness and risk-taking by church officials. Phrased more positively, they want to encourage religious authorities to act more responsibly and carefully, especially regarding the safety of children.

SNAP leaders are convinced that if church hierarchies can get by with secretly hiring known criminals and giving those criminals prominent roles and impressive titles they’ll keep on taking those risks. So for the sake of public safety, the group feels morally compelled to bring attention to proven predators and to those who employ predators.

For these reasons, SNAP has urged Bishop Jelinek to look into this situation. “Come clean with your flock,” the group said about any other predators operating in Minnesota with the approval of the diocese.

The victims didn’t get loud and rowdy. They didn’t make unsubstantiated charges or use inflammatory language. They didn’t go door-to-door, alarming residents who live near these two predators. They didn’t even call for the two men to be ousted.

Instead, SNAP held a brief, peaceful, reasonable news conference outside the Minnesota Episcopal headquarters and calmly asked the state’s top Episcopal figure to be more careful and open so that no more children suffer the devastation of child sexual assault.

It didn’t seem like too much to ask.

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