

Excerpt of a letter written by a young Sister Worker to Tharold Sylvester

Dated: February 11, 1991

In my own experience in two fields where there were molestation cases, I have learned:

The offender did not fully acknowledge his wrong until he was in the hands of the law.

The victim was not able to begin healing until it had been publicly acknowledged through proper legal channels to have committed a crime against her. That the behavior had ceased was not enough. In the one case, several months passed from the time the behavior ceased to the time the victim reported the crime. It was only after the crime was reported that she had access to the counseling and support she so badly needed to rise above it all. I might mention also that the offender himself expressed relief when the matter was finally settled in court.

The friends in the field did not settle down until we had visited in each home, brought the unpleasant matter out in the open, stated out loud that the problem was of a sexual nature. (Euphemisms were not adequate.) We stated a few facts to counteract imagination and/or rumors, and then gave them a chance to vent their feelings and bring up any concerns. Most of them were first extremely angry, but later supportive of us and of the family. The friends who had more difficulty were the ones who already had hidden, unresolved problems of their own.

I was dubious about the wisdom of tackling these visits. It felt like tattling, and I worried it might stir up unnecessary trouble. Actually, we discovered it to be a great relief to have things out in the open. For instance, we had some very upset parents of small children asking, "If you knew about this, why didn't you warn us earlier?" We had no answer, except that we had been naïve. Also, when one family knew, and they would be talking to another family, and they were wondering, "Do they know?" and "If they know, do they that we know?" This made for a strong undercurrent of tension that popped like a bubble when everyone knew the facts, and everyone knew that everyone else knew. Here I might add that the facts we gave them had already been established in court.

We also let each family know that they were free to talk directly to us or to the family involved if they had further questions. Then we made good on our promise to listen to and answer them. Actually, there were not many who needed to talk further; for most, it was settled for them with one visit.

In the second case, the offender had an unblemished reputation. We all reacted with "But he would never do a thing like that," and concluded it must be a false accusation. We just couldn't believe it. But we had to believe it when confronted by the fact that he had pled guilty. There could have easily been sidetaking in the church. But when someone said "He wouldn't

do that," we could simply answer, "He pled guilty. He's been sentenced." This kept us workers out of the position of having to judge or take sides. His guilt had already been established. We were simply supporting the laws of the land. There was no problem. If people felt the sentence was too strict or too lenient; the Judge had decided that matter. No problem with differing opinions about what kind of counseling should be given the family members; that was decided by the authorities. No problem with getting him to follow through with treatment; he had to or be found in contempt of court.

Meanwhile, the man is saying to himself, "But I'd surely never do a thing like that." Very difficult for him to admit to himself even, that he'd really done it. As hard for him to believe as it was for us. But having to face the legal consequences helped him to face the reality of what he had done. (When the police knocked at the door with arrest warrant and handcuffs, it got pretty real.) That was the first step towards repentance. The court ordered treatment that followed established the seriousness of what he had done and offered him a positive course of action. When the friends saw that he was sincerely working with the treatment program, they were wonderfully supportive.

The program also guided him in the steps of making amends. One step was writing a letter of apology, and later an oral apology. He was required to state exactly and completely what he did; a partial or general apology was not acceptable. He stated that what he did was wrong, and that he was sorry. **He was not allowed to ask her to forgive him.** That was her decision; his responsibility was to simply apologize. The responsibility for making things right was on him, and asking her to forgive him was putting some responsibility over on to her, and that was not his right to do. The whole problem started with asking her to do things he had no right to ask, and the counselors were trying to help him break that pattern. It seems that addicts often feel that if they can get the victim to forgive, it will make things all right, and then the addict doesn't have to change.

The treatment also taught the offender how to deal with the terrible overpowering shame he felt once his denial was broken down. This man's wife told us that his shame was incapacitating, and his counselors spent weeks trying to help him to deal with it and go on. Without their specialized help, she felt he would not have been able to recover himself.

His counselors also taught him that every day for the rest of his life he must remind himself, "I am a sex offender. I have the potential to hurt someone, and I must watch myself because this could happen again." They said that any time he begins to believe he will not do it again, he is likely to repeat the crime.

According to the little brochure we picked up at the police station, any professional, which includes teachers, counselors, medical personnel, and ministers, who becomes aware of a case of child abuse or molestation, is required by law to report it. That's a legal

obligation. As for our moral obligation, I personally feel that it parallels the duty of a citizen who knows about a murder. We do wrong if we keep quiet. We aid the criminal if we keep quiet.

...I need assurance that when we make special meeting plans, we can place workers in the homes of our people and feel confident that their doctrine and behavior will be godly. When I give our friends addresses for meetings in another state, I want to know that they will be safe there.

As you older brothers deal with this matter, you are in my prayers. Thank you for taking time to consider the fears I feel as a woman and as a young worker.