

Sex abuse scandal kept quiet

By Kira Garrett | Posted on Friday, April 08, 2011 at 4:26 pm

The Saint John's Abbey reached a settlement with attorney Jeff Anderson regarding nine alleged victims in a sex abuse case claiming allegations against 17 monks at the Abbey.

The biggest concern for students regarding the settlement and sex abuse allegations is the secrecy shrouding communication between the Saint John's Abbey and the rest of the St. John's community.

Students are growing increasingly frustrated with the refusal of the Abbey to comment on the case and with the lack of released information.

"I think that the Abbey spokesperson saying 'no comment' was the worst thing he could've done," sophomore William Heck said in an email.

The non-compensation elements of the settlement appeared clear during a press conference on the matter March 28, held by Jeff Anderson, the St. Paul attorney representing alleged victims in the case.

In the conference, Anderson said the Abbey would be required to send out a letter to the families of students at St. John's Prep. School and to all alumni of the Prep. School listing the names of 17 Saint John's monks accused of sexual abuse.

The Abbey later issued a statement to select community members that called to question Anderson's accuracy in the press conference, but did not send this statement to CSB/SJU students.

"There is a discrepancy between what Mr. Anderson announced at the news conference and what Saint John's Abbey's understanding of one of the non-compensation elements of the recent settlement with the Anderson firm and his clients," the statement said.

Anderson assured the matter was cleared up and that he and the Abbey have since reached a mutual understanding.

"We got it cleared up afterwards," Anderson said. "Another press release went out explaining, in writing, what we agreed upon and it was affirmed by the Abbey."

The Abbey did not send this updated press release to CSB/SJU students either and failed to respond to a press inquiry requesting the release.

Child abuse cases, especially those involving the Catholic church, are notoriously touchy subjects and are often shrouded in shame. This is true for many students who feel uncomfortable with the way the Abbey has chosen to deal with the allegations.

“It is really embarrassing for us as a student body to have elders representing us like this,” sophomore Andy Stahlman said in an email. “I’m really sick of people from other schools saying how creepy our campus is because the monks could rape us.”

Paying for the settlement

Many students also wonder how the Abbey will pay for the settlement. Unlike at CSB, SJU is still officially affiliated with and financially connected to the Abbey.

First-year Chris Braun is one student concerned about how the Abbey’s settlement will affect him.

“I want to know where they are getting the money to pay or settle the abuse scandals. I don’t think our tuition money should go toward this,” Braun said in an email. “And if it is being paid for by the church, that money is given to the church by parish members for other reasons.”

Anderson said on several occasions he will not release the monetary amount of the settlement.

“This is not because we want to hide the amount,” Anderson said. “We are not releasing it because as soon as we do, the focus will go from the victims to the money and that is not what we want.”

Though a spokesperson for the Abbey failed to comment, Anderson assured the funds would not be taken from student tuition.

“This settlement is far from creating any trouble for the Abbey financially,” Anderson said. “They have a general fund and that will be used for the settlement.”

Dangerous still

Another pressing worry is that the Abbey has placed certain restrictions on the accused monks but ultimately has allowed them to remain a part of the St. John’s community.

The 17 named monks were previously placed under a “safety plan” and those still at St. John’s are welcome to journey the campus except the Prep. School, residence halls and fitness center. Accused monks also cannot officiate mass or teach.

PhD. and licensed psychologist Renee Fredrickson warns that this is not a safe arrangement and the monks should be removed from the community, though the settlement includes victims age 9 to 16 years old at the time of their alleged abuse and took place between 1960 and 2000.

Fredrickson has worked with child abuse victims and abusers for 38 years and does not think the Abbey responded correctly to accusations.

“These cases will keep coming up if the monks are allowed to remain a part of that community,” Fredrickson said. “The nature of sex abuse is that abusers get more and more out of control as it progresses, and it does progress.”

Fredrickson also thinks the nature of the Catholic community could foster more sex abusers than other communities, which is why cases of sex abuse continue in the Catholic church.

“I think the celibacy aspect of the church could attract some people to keep them from doing what they want to do,” Fredrickson said, “Which is why there are so many instances of sexual abuse in churches.”

Moving forward

Now that a settlement has been reached between the Abbey and Anderson regarding nine alleged victims, Fredrickson urges the community to shift focus from frustration to compassion and communication, both for the alleged victims and abusers.

“We should focus on the fact that they need help and get that help to them,” Fredrickson said. “And we should focus on listening and helping the victims.”

Sophomore Matthew Pribyl agrees with Fredrickson and hopes the community can move forward from the settlement and show com

“It’s important we reach out not only to victims but to the men who committed the crimes. I don’t believe any man (or woman) wants to become a sexual perpetrator,” Pribyl said in an email. “It should not only be justice that we seek, but the compassion to hold out a helping hand to all those who suffer, both the victims and the culprits.”

Though representatives from the Abbey have not commented on future plans, the Abbey does have an official policy and help resources on its website for victims.

The Star Tribune also reported that many of the named monks are in therapy programs, though the Abbey did not confirm this.

Without addressing the student body and St. John’s community, Fredrickson thinks concerns will only increase.

“There’s a big no-talk rule in a lot of church communities,” Fredrickson said. “That certainly seems to be the case here.”

Campaign provokes sex discussion

By Kira Garrett | Posted on Wednesday, March 02, 2011 at 12:30 am



Photo by Evan Gruenes

The Record investigates sex on campus, and the efforts to promote sexual responsibility among the CSB/SJU community.

Sex. Many members of the CSB/SJU community think this word, not often heard on a Catholic campus, is a necessary topic of discussion.

The peer resource group Health Advocates launched a new campaign this month, The Elephant in the Room, to promote discussion about sexual responsibility.

Health Advocates hope to spur discussion about sex-related topics and inform students about resources available on campus, but the campaign has exposed a paradox. This promotion comes at a time when the values of many students do not match those of the institution.

"It's a slippery slope talking about sexual responsibility on a Catholic campus but it is important because we want to give every student access to information," Health Advocate Alison Gresback said.

Director of CSB/SJU Counseling and Health Promotion and CSB Health Services Mike Ewing points out that the school and its health centers are aligned with Catholic teachings and Christian beliefs about sexuality.

Though the Catholic church condemns pre-marital sex, 49.2 percent of Bennies and 64.1 percent of Johnnies reported having sex in a 2009 school-wide health survey. With over half the student population engaging in sexual activity, access to information about sexual health is crucial.

"There is a little dilemma here," Ewing said. "There is important education needed on sexual health, but some people object when they perceive there may be incongruence between education or health care and church teachings."

The Elephant campaign has also been a challenge because students need to make sure the campaign is not at all exclusionary.

"We had to make sure the campaign is inclusive of all sexual orientations and all types of relationships," Gresback said, although the Catholic church also condemns sexual relations between single-genders.

1.3 percent of Bennies and 3.3 percent of Johnnies listed themselves as homosexual in the same survey, with .9 percent of Bennies and 1.3 percent of Johnnies listed as bisexual, again demonstrating a divide

between student beliefs and the school's. Gresback though, thinks the administration is aware that student choices do not, in many cases, align with Catholic teachings.

"The administration understands the catch 22 we have on this campus and works with us on proposals for campaigns like this," Gresback said.

Senior Kelsey Lehnertz, among other students, still considers sex a taboo topic on campus.

"It seems to me there is a huge contradiction on campus," senior Kelsey Lehnertz said. "Our campus is known as being liberal but then no one talks about anything sex-related and our school takes such a conservative stance when it comes to sex."

Junior Kyra Knoff worked with Health Advocates last semester and has also noticed a void between students and CSB/SJU on the subject.

"I think students are open with friends talking about sex but not when talking with their health care provider," Knoff said. "We want to make them aware that we aren't here to judge them but just make them aware of resources."

Ewing suggests it is not necessarily the campuses that stifle talk about sex, but instead a general discomfort for conversations regarding intimate topics.

"People of all ages have a wide range of comfort talking about sex," Ewing said. "Developmentally, some people are very uncomfortable talking about sexual intimacy."

Instead, Ewing takes confidence in the role of the Health Centers in allowing students to determine their own values and make decisions accordingly, despite the common belief that the Health Centers do not offer students birth control.

"The health center decisions about administering birth control is between an individual and the health care provider," Ewing said. "It's not accurate to say the institutions are withholding information. Our role is to provide education and to encourage students to make decisions according to their values and beliefs."

CSB/SJU compare similarly to other Catholic institutions, but offer much less sex-ed programming than larger public schools.

Though half CSB/SJU students engage in sexual relations, against the Catholic stance on the subject, Ewing stresses the fact that the Health Centers stand for education, not judgement.

"Some may believe that being at a religiously sponsored college limits the conversation, but I think being permitted to discuss values and beliefs adds to the conversation about sexual health rather than limiting it," Ewing said. "Our staff (is) committed to answer students' questions honestly and accurately."

Students denied Communion

By Kira Garrett | Posted on Tuesday, October 05, 2010 at 6:56 pm



Photo by Sophouen Chhin

Students were turned away from receiving Communion Sunday for wearing rainbow buttons.

“All are welcome,” church-goers sang during the opening hymn at the student mass Sunday. The St. John’s Abbey welcomed Archbishop John C. Nienstedt of the Archdiocese of St. Paul-Minneapolis to lead the mass. Nienstedt in turn excluded some GLBT supporters by refusing to grant them Eucharist.

PRiSM members and GLBT supporters arranged to wear rainbow buttons to the mass in a peaceful sit-in after senior PRiSM Educational Liaison Ana Seivert sent an e-mail rallying PRiSM members. During mass, the group of students approached Nienstedt for communion. Some reached their hands out to receive the body of Christ and were sent back to their seats without the holy sacrament. Nienstedt’s visit came directly after the Catholic Church produced a DVD that reinforces the church’s opposition to same-sex marriage. Nienstedt fully supports the DVD which will be distributed to Catholics throughout the state.

“Our goal was to show that our (GLBT) community respects the Benedictine values,” Seivert said. “We did this because we needed to address the DVDs and make a statement and we wanted to do that by participating in mass.”

Fellow PRiSM member and junior Elizabeth Gleich stressed the importance of community for GLBT supporters.

“We wanted to gather together as a community of supporters and participate in mass with the rest of our student body,” Gleich said. “Our only intention was to stand in solidarity.”

The assembly met briefly before mass to determine where it would sit. Dir. Of Life Safety Shawn Vierzba approached the group during this initial gathering.

“Shawn came up to us and pretty much just told us not to make a disturbance,” Gleich said.

Life Safety officers do not generally patrol mass but several officers were present Sunday. Vierzba said the officers were there as heightened security only because the Archbishop was visiting, not because they heard word of a protest.

“We had a VIP on campus with the Archbishop, so we were there,” Vierzba said. “We’ve been present during other masses. It’s not a new thing.”

Those involved in the sit-in were disheartened and embarrassed by Nienstedt's refusal to offer them Communion.

"He took one look at that pin and it felt like he was saying, 'you are not worthy of receiving Jesus,'" Gleich said. In contrast to the welcoming community of the CSB/SJU monastics, Nienstedt's public rejection of GLBT supporters especially shocked students.

"We have found great support within our community but Nienstedt's actions go against that," Gleich said. "A lot of students here may be uncomfortable on the issue of homosexuality, but when they see a classmate, a roommate, a friend standing up for it and getting denied, that sends a shock."

PRiSM members organized several GLBT-friendly events for Coming Out Week which took place Sept. 20-24, including a Safe Space Training presentation.

"We were just coming off of Coming Out Week where we felt so supported by our community," Seivert said. "Nienstedt came in and denied us of our community."

For Seivert and others denied Communion, the mass was a glimpse into the life of a sexual minority. It showed them what discrimination feels like.

"Allies were denied too and it was really a glimpse into feeling that judgment," Seivert said.

While this is the first time students have been denied Communion in the St. John's Abbey, the action was not new for Nienstedt. He issued an official warning to a large group of GLBT supporters who planned to wear rainbow sashes to mass at the Cathedral in St. Paul.

"Anyone wearing a 'rainbow sash' will not be permitted to receive Holy Communion, since their dissent is a sign that they have publicly broken communion with the Church's teaching," Nienstedt said in a letter to a GLBT supporter. "I also ask that those not wearing the sashes refrain from sharing the Holy Eucharist with those who do. Such an action is unbecoming the dignity of the sacrament."

"In comparison to the Benedictines and the CSB/SJU community, Nienstedt and Archbishops in general are conservative," Fr. Rene McGraw said.

Church law in the past has said the only reason one can deny communion is if that person is a public sinner but Nienstedt has expanded that ruling to include actions that go against Catholic teachings.

"I think it's a very bad idea," McGraw said. "We wouldn't deny someone communion who was wearing an 'I am heterosexual' sticker, so why would we for gay supporters?"

Those that participated in the sit-in agreed, and felt the mass made obvious the differences between the CSB/SJU community and the attitude of Nienstedt.

"I offered a mass following the student mass to those students who weren't allowed to receive the Eucharist," McGraw said. "It's the church that's causing the problems here, not the students or their opinions."

Gleich agreed and thinks Nienstedt and those with similar conservative views are driving Christians away from Catholicism.

Others, though, felt the sit-in was inappropriate as Nienstedt is a prominent figure in the Catholic community and should be respected for his teaching of the Catholic beliefs.

"I'm all for standing up for what you believe in, but whether or not using the Eucharist as a tool in that is another thing," McGraw said.

Nienstedt has returned to his parish in the metro-area and has not issued a statement to students at CSB/SJU. Students angered by his actions during mass now hope to continue dialogue about what happened.

"If there's anything we can learn from this, it's that we are now talking about GLBT and PRiSM and homosexuality and we're going to continue talking about it," Seivert said.

PRiSM hopes to set up a booth in Gorecki in the coming weeks to help explain Nienstedt's DVD and discuss the mass with any students who wish to do so.