

Clergy Misconduct Response / Intervention Team

For the New England Conference Journal - 2009

By Rev. Marilyn Owen Robb – Coordinator / Case Manager

The Response / Intervention Team and interdisciplinary Steering Committee were re-structured in 2003 with Marilyn Robb, Coordinator / Case Manager. The R/I Team covers the entire conference which will include Vermont. Team members are recruited, received through volunteering, and are men, women, lay, clergy, long time and new church folk, with a priority on the growing diversity that is our conference. The R/I Team works with cases and the Steering Committee oversees Education / Prevention and the coordinating / communication between all boards and committees involved in lay or clergy misconduct.

The *First Contact* brochure, created in 2005 by the R/I Team defines sexual misconduct, the steps for creating a complaint and reporting a violation, and “first contact people”. It is available electronically, from the R/I Team, or at Annual Conference and should be visible and easily accessible in every local church and United Methodist office so that no one will wonder about misconduct and what to do about it. The brochure is currently in English, Spanish by Luis Benavides and is being translated into Korean. The Spanish version, slightly edited is being taken by Joanne Reich of the General Board of Global Ministries to churches and missions in Latin and South America.

The Response / Intervention Team (R/I Team) has increasingly been called upon for lay misconduct situations. The new Lay Misconduct Policy, created by the Steering Committee in conjunction with the R/I Team, is ready for Conference approval in 2009. A new Clergy Misconduct Policy will be ready for the 2010 Annual Conference session.

The R/I Team, also welcoming the Steering Committee, meets in training retreat twice a year. The training has involved a deepening understanding of the one who crosses the boundaries of the sacred trust bestowed upon clergy and lay leadership, and the victim-survivors and the long term impact on their lives. It also spent a weekend with a base in the book, *The Sunflower* by Holocaust survivor Simon Wiesenthal on the issue of forgiveness which can haunt victims, often congregations, and even the accused. Training is also increasingly necessary in the area of cyber safety.

The R/I Team presents each year to the new pastors in Licensing School about the work of the R/I Team and how to prevent misconduct as clergy. It also offers information about responding when one finds themselves serving a church where misconduct occurred. Resource material is distributed with the assumption that information must be readily available for the moment the issue comes forward – simply remembering Licensing School is not adequate.

When a violation does occur and a potential victim comes forward to her / his pastor, district superintendent or R/I Team manager, the bishop is immediately informed. A team of at least three to four from the R/I Team is deployed by the case manager to the church – one assigned to the accused, one to the complainant (alleged victim), and one or two to the congregation. This R/I Team works with the leadership of the church and the district superintendent, always keeping the bishop informed. The Conference Communications Director assists the team and / or church when media might be involved. Upon completion of a case, the Steering Committee will reflect on the process but without names of individuals or churches.

The general church has placed this issue with the General Commission on the Status and Role of Women (COSROW). A new position and director has been named whose work is defined following this report. For the past six years, leaders in sexual ethics from ten annual conferences along with general church agencies involved in dealing with misconduct issues have come together as a task force to communicate and better coordinate the work being done in the denomination around sexual misconduct. Marilyn Robb is a part of this task force that will now have the leadership of the new staff person dedicated to this issue. .

The New England Conference Steering Committee and Response / Intervention Team and the general church look forward to the day when there is no work for anyone in this area. But until that day arrives, the NEAC is committed to appropriate justice, healing, and clear and adequate education and prevention for everyone.

Openness, feedback, honesty, and truth are the ways of Jesus Christ. “No peace lies in the future which is hidden in the present instant.” (*Fra Giovanni – 1445-1525*)