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Congregational Healing

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I. Effects of the Trauma

Traumatic events have well-documented effects, both immediate and delayed. When a congregation experiences a trauma, the impact is likely to be expressed through symptoms such as:

A. Loss of energy or feeling of paralysis;
B. Distrust of leadership (often projected onto future leadership);
C. Divisions within the congregational group;
D. Some group members feeling isolated, and withdrawing from the group;
E. Anger being displaced onto unrelated issues, or blown out of proportion;
F. A conspiracy of silence about the traumatic event;
G. Despair about the group's future;
H. Distorting responsibility for the event;
I. Seeking a "quick fix" without thoughtful reflection; and
J. Difficulty making normal and necessary decisions.

All of these symptoms could be carried into subsequent years unless the trauma is processed and integrated into the life of the congregation. A useful model for addressing and integrating a trauma is the "debriefing" model drawn from disciplines that do crisis counseling, such as emergency medicine, law enforcement, military science, crisis chaplaincy, and disaster agencies.

A trauma debriefing allows participants to integrate the reality of the event with their own responses to that event. The Congregational Trauma Debriefing model set forth in Section III is an effective means to communicate, process, and accept facts, allow feelings to surface, and then head into the future unhindered by the past.

II. Guiding Principles for Healing in the Congregation

In taking steps to promote healing in the congregation, the following guidelines shall be used:

A. Contact with Complainant(s)

Before the process for congregational healing begins, the Bishop or his representative should maintain regular contact with the Complainant(s) and describe to Complainant(s) the procedures to be used for promoting congregational healing.

B. Privacy Concerns

The privacy of the Complainant(s) must be balanced against the need for openness with the congregation. Insofar as possible, the identity of the Complainant(s) and any details which may identify him/her, should be kept confidential.

C. Providing Facts

The procedures shall take into account that parishioners usually know when "something is going on" and, in the absence of facts, rumor and speculation will grow.

D. Notifying Lay Leadership

The lay leadership of the affected congregation should be advised promptly of the issues, since that group's participation is vital in planning and implementing the processes for congregational healing.

E. Trauma Debriefing

The healing and unity of a congregation are fostered when there is an open congregational meeting, called a Congregational Trauma Debriefing ("Debriefing"), at which the Bishop and/or the Bishop's designated representative present as much factual information as possible.

Since the congregation likely will include people who have experienced abuse or misconduct themselves, appropriate personnel trained in crisis ministry should be present and available on a small group or one-to-one basis immediately after the formal presentation. Also, local mental health resources (including sliding-scale fee agencies) should be publicized so that members of the congregation know how to find these services. (Note that many communities have publicly-funded sexual assault services, which offer a variety of specialized resources.) The Debriefing generally should follow the process set forth in Section III, below. The message should be "The Church is a place for truth . . . We follow the One who described Himself as Way, Truth and Life."

F. Parish Spokesperson

The vestry, in consultation with the Bishop, may appoint a parish spokesperson. Both the parish and its spokesperson are encouraged to consult with the diocesan spokesperson. The congregation, including parishioners and staff members, are urged to refer all media inquiries to the parish and/or diocesan spokesperson.

G. Interim Priest

If the circumstances require that an interim priest be engaged, that priest should have special training in trauma debriefing. The interim priest should have regular opportunities to report and consult with the Bishop, his/her designated staff person, and counselors.

H. Consulting Legal Authorities

Neither the Bishop nor any other church worker should attempt to impede persons who wish to consult with legal authorities.

I. Additional Information and Meetings

If new information comes to light after the first Debriefing, further meetings may be held. Additionally, regular follow-up sessions with the affected congregation should be held during the first year after disclosure of the incident(s).

J. Additional Church Responses

Additional appropriate church responses may include:

1. Regular prayer for the Complainant(s), the Respondent(s), and the congregation;

2. Preaching on the subject of violation of trust and liturgical acts of corporate penance;

3. Securing a safe place for the Complainant(s) and the Complainant's family in community life;

4. In the event that incarceration or other punitive action follows legal proceedings, developing a means for the congregation to deal appropriately with the person who may be imprisoned.

III. Trauma Debriefing: A Model for a Congregational Meeting

The following procedures should be followed for the Debriefing:

A. Steps Prior to Meeting

1. **Select Leaders**. Carefully choose a Congregational Trauma Debriefing team and a leader or co-leaders who have had experience with a debriefing or trauma-related process. It is important that the Bishop or the Bishop's representative be a visible participant in the Debriefing, but not in the role of leadership.

2. **Schedule and Notify**. Schedule the Debriefing as soon as possible after the complaint becomes public knowledge. Ensure that all members of the congregation and parish staff are notified of the Debriefing by telephone, e-mail, overnight mail, or other fast and reliable method of notification. It is important to get a wide participation, so that all who experience the trauma also share the Debriefing experience.

3. **Choose Meeting Place**. Hold the Debriefing in an appropriate place, preferably on church property. Although an opening prayer is appropriate, this should not be a liturgical event.

4. **Address the News Media**. While the Debriefing should not be confidential, it is important that no one be placed in jeopardy because of any disclosures made during that meeting. Therefore, it is preferable that the news media not be present for the Debriefing, but meet after the Debriefing with the parish spokesperson, the diocesan spokesperson and/or the Bishop.

B. Agenda for the Meeting

1. **Open the Meeting**. The Bishop or his representative briefly should welcome the attendees, as should one of the lay leaders. The lay leader then should introduce himself or herself, explain the Debriefing process, and outline the guidelines for the Debriefing. It is important to keep the Debriefing to the specified procedures; leaders should be prepared for a lengthy meeting.

2. **Present the Facts**. The facts and chronology of the trauma should be presented verbally, supplemented by written notations such as a summary handout, or by writing notes on newsprint during the factual presentation. The goal is to ensure that all those present have a common record of the traumatic event (a "consensual reality"). Note that this is not a time for feelings to be expressed, and the group may need some direction to withhold those feelings until the next phase of the Debriefing.

3. **Solicit Reactions**. Once a complete record has been presented, the lay leader should invite parishioners to express their reactions to the facts. (Some parishioners may need to be directed to express their own feelings and not those of others.) No feelings, however trivial, intense, or unusual, should be discounted, and no effort should be made to fix, soothe or smooth over them. The responses simply are to be collected and heard.

4. **Examine Repercussions**. Once reactions have been expressed fully, the leader should ask those present to turn their attention to the repercussions of the event, and consider the congregation's future. This step bridges the trauma with the ongoing life of those involved in the trauma. It may be a time to explore some of the issues the congregation will face in the near future. As with the presentation of facts, the issues raised may be noted both verbally and with writings.

5. **Seek Context and Perspective**. Members of the congregation also should be invited to place the event within a context or perspective. There may be expressions of confusion or helplessness, or curiosity about how other groups have resolved an issue of this type. In this phase, people may have an awareness of paradox and pose some hard questions such as the following:

Why do bad things happen?

How can it be that such a talented priest could be involved in misconduct?

Why do things like this happen in a church?

Where does the responsibility lie?

What about the resources of our faith?

Leaders have discretion whether to respond, or to simply allow others to speak.

C. Actions After the Meeting

1. **Plan for the Future**. The final step is planning. This could include a) scheduling a follow-up session one or two months into the future; b) discussing the ways in which the pastoral and sacramental needs of the congregation will be met; or c) describing the resources available to people who may need counseling or other specialized attention.

2. **Provide Trained Counselors**. For the immediate needs of those present, it is important that trained crisis professionals be available in the church building so that individuals or groups may process their feelings further. These professionals are present simply to listen and support people in integrating the trauma.

3. **Debrief the Debriefing**. After the Debriefing, members of the Congregational Trauma Debriefing Team should meet to discuss their own experiences with the Debriefing meeting, in order to do the following:

a) Plan the follow-up monitoring of the congregation in the future;

b) Determine whether there are issues that will need further clarification;

c) Determine whether there are complicating factors, or factors that require special, continuing attention;

d) Decide what the lay leadership of the congregation requires to address the issue further; and

e) Evaluate the Debriefing meeting itself (or agree to do so at a later date).

IV. Congregational Follow-up: The First Year

Even with the best of care, a congregation that has experienced sexual misconduct will need an ongoing program of support and assistance, especially in the first year. This year will be devoted to a healing process, in which the congregation slowly will integrate the reality of its experience into its future. If such integration does not take place, the congregation may suffer from prolonged loss of energy, despair about the future, loss and/or isolation of some members, distrust of lay and/or ordained leadership or of the Bishop, and difficulty making decisions or taking risks.

A. Follow-up Activities

Follow-up with a congregation may take any of several forms:

1. **Meeting With Bishop**. A meeting between the Bishop or the Bishop's representative and the vestry of the affected congregation in order to assess the healing process of the congregation;

2. **Staff Input**. Obtaining input from church staff (including an interim priest where present) about their observations regarding the incident and the Debriefing process;

3. **Study Groups**. Establishing study groups to consider the issues of clergy ethics and/or ethics in the workplace, perhaps by reading a selected book for discussion;

4. **Self-evaluation**. Conducting a congregational self-evaluation, through the use of a questionnaire or survey instrument;

5. **Focus Groups**. Creating congregational focus groups to address the issue of where the congregation stands in its process of moving ahead;

6. **Committee on Congregational Life**. Forming a Committee on Congregational Life charged with assessing the needs and planning programs for continued healing;

7. **Professional Consultant**. Appointing a professional consultant experienced with issues of clergy sexual misconduct to work with the vestry and affected congregation on the components of the healing process.

B. Using the Trauma to Help Others

Some congregations, having worked through a history of sexual misconduct, take up a special vocation in a related area. Such steps signify that the congregation has moved into the redemptive activity of letting its own pain be a gift for others. Among possible actions:

1. **Helping Other Congregations**. Offering help to other congregations confronted with the same issues;

2. **Sponsoring Programs**. Sponsoring seminars or programs on ethics and sexuality;

3. **Church Building**. Offering their church building for use by community groups to address issues of sexual abuse; or

4. **"Stranger Danger" Programs**. Developing "Stranger Danger" or other programs for young people about protecting themselves from abuse.

C. Using the Trauma to Help Themselves

Perhaps most heartening are congregations that take a clear-eyed look at clergy-congregation relations. These congregations can move into an awareness that, while each cleric is responsible for his/her own behavior, there are congregational factors that can contribute to a climate in which sexual misconduct occurs. Such congregations could commit themselves to:

1. **Mutual Evaluation**. Providing honest feedback to their ordained leadership through a regular process of mutual evaluation;

2. **Lessening Risk of Burn-out**. Ensuring sufficient time off and continuing education time so that clergy are less at risk of becoming burned-out or isolated;

3. **Professional Care**. Funding and supporting benefits packages that allow clergy to consult with professional care givers when needed; or

4. **Foster Clergy Family Life**. Supporting, through clear policies developed in consultation with the clergy, ways to foster clergy family life and maintain the boundaries between home and church.