

MACSAS CONFERENCE 2009 – EDINBURGH Saturday 17th October 2009

Summary of Key Note Presentations: Peter Isely (USA Midwest Director of SNAP)

SNAP: The Survivors Network for those Abused by Priests

There have been 9000 members of SNAP. The treatment, indifference and re-victimization of survivors by church members is worse than the sexual abuse and assaults. There is a moral lasting consequence to their actions.

The most important thing for survivors is to find each other. Survivors often go to their churches first feeling a responsibility and duty to tell of what has happened so that it may be changed and not happen to others. However survivors are shocked by the responses of the church, their refusal to hear, their continued denial of the abuse. And what is worse; survivors find out that the churches already knew about their abusing priests.

When a report is about to be published in America now, the Bishops often say, as in Ireland, “we are all going to be shocked”. This is called **‘false teaming’** trying to make us all part of the same team against such terrible abuse.

There is nothing more humiliating than to go to your bishop to tell them of what happened to you and they already knew. They are not “shocked” by the findings in the reports because they were always aware of the abuse committed by their priests they colluded in covering it up, in silencing any victims who came forward, and in allowing the priests to continue in ministry to continue abusing in other parishes.

Survivors can never be healed as if the abuse never happened. The trauma of sexual abuse does not move or have an echo. Survivors can only use that absence they feel inside, the absence of the divine, of love, use that place of affliction from which we speak.

First the abuser steals the body and then steals the voice.

We must restore the survivor’s voice and enable them to name what has happened. Survivors all have a single, universal voice coming from having lost our voice. It is the voice of truth and of justice.

Nobody WANTS to join our group. Often survivors are stuck contemplating the fantasy life they would have had had they not been abused. We must break this fantasy and live with our experiences as who we are now. That is our testimony.

Despite the 20 years SNAP has been going nothing has changed about the issue of child abuse, yet the 15 years of progress witnessed in America is far greater than the last 15 centuries.

Tom Doyle is a priest of conscience, one of the very few to speak out for survivors and against the church authorities that have colluded in the abuse of so many children by priests. To speak out against the church is to be finished. Priests are not a group at all invested in helping survivors.

Nothing happens until survivors make it happen, not ever, not anywhere. Every initiative, inquiry, change in policy, has happened because survivors were brave enough to speak out and not be silenced.

I don't know if the church can change, BUT survivors can change and the more we change the more society changes and the church changes.

Survivors are active, catalysts that engage the conscience of those who have a conscience. Use the media, lawyers, public opinion to get the church inside the law and held accountable.

If you are assaulted by a clergy person you are a non person outside of the law, left by society because society privileges religion over children. Somehow society says WE CANNOT LIVE WITHOUT RELIGION.

Just like Cephas when he confronted Jesus, the Bishops know the survivor is innocent, that the cases reported are true BUT acknowledging this truth will bring down trouble upon the church and church authorities. They think that the church will collapse because of one person. If the survivor would just shut up then all would be okay. We must save our church. The survivor is only one person, and it is a small price to pay.

SNAP

SNAP is a self organizing entity: groups are coming and going all the time. There are 82 chapters and each is different. We act as catalysts for each other. It only takes one person to open a chapter.

SNAP maintains a visible media presence keeping survivors in focus. Survivors should not wait, they should get going and see what happens. SNAP is an action based organisation and we recognise that we are working in a hostile environment. We deliberately use a political model based upon the idea that we respond straight away.

Survivors should keep networking. The church knows what to be afraid of: survivors figuring it all out and bringing it all down.

SNAP has managed to get laws changed in some states: eliminating the criminal statute of limitation for child abuse, however it is harder to change the civil statutes. We had to intervene because the law had failed to do its job in respect of child abuse.

Through filing cases we have managed to get access to the records held by the church on their 'wayward' priests which had previously been kept secret. THERE IS NO PROOF LIKE PROOF. These records show the level of collusion by church authorities, show what the church knew about their abusing priests and when they knew it.

What conversation are you going to have?

It was only in 2002 that things moved forward in America. However the issue of clergy abuse had first surfaced in the early 1990s. Allegations were brought against Archbishop Bernardine of Chicago in 1992 however one specific allegation was found to be false and this halted progress and threatened the existence of SNAP. This one case was held onto by the church as evidence that all allegations were false.

Later other allegations were brought against Bernardine and these were not proven to be false.

However at the time SNAP took the stand that it would affirm the Court system. It took to 2002 to move forward. Money talks and to date over \$3 billion has been paid out. In Los Angeles the

Catholic Church set up a compensation scheme and allowed victims a year in which to file claims. Over \$3/4 billion was paid out.

There have been dozens of empanelled grand jury's investigating abuse by clergy across America. These reports have been made public and the truth is at last coming out.

Our advice to survivors is DO NOT GO TO THE CHURCH.

- (1) Get help and support;
- (2) Go to the state or public authorities; and only then
- (3) Go to the Church.

SNAP works with Bishops and Cardinals for strategic reasons. We go to church; we are visible in church communities; we pray a little longer, kneel a little longer, turn up more often, anything to ensure we are heard and are part of the discourse.

In America the Bishops wanted to have one conversation and SNAP wanted to know what was known by the Bishops.

You need to get onto each case. There should be a zero tolerance to all abuse cases.

Challenge those making the rules, get in on the conversation, and change the conversation.

Public pressure needs to be brought, don't focus on the church. The public will stop trusting the clergy if the truth comes out and then something will have to be done about it.

Priesthood is a professional occupation. Plato considered that there were two types of professional occupation: Guardian occupations and Commercial occupations; the public need to trust those in Guardian occupations. If that trust is broken then the occupation ceases to be valid. The clergy are in a Guardian occupation. If you break the public trust and the honour of the clergy is questioned then it can't function properly.

Survivors need to reframe the discourse. It's not about Boundaries it's about Suitability. We must challenge the Bishops who keep saying that we never knew and it's about proper training of clergy, to keep proper boundaries. If a clergyman has to be trained not to sexually abuse a child then that person is not suitable for ministry.