

The Saturday morning Working Group Panel included all six working groups addressing “Where Have We Been?” Steve Sheehan presented the following report for the Goal #1 Working Group – To Support Those Who Have Been Abused

When the Boston Globe broke the story on clergy sexual abuse in January of 2002, we, the people in the pews, had virtually no understanding of the devastating effect of these crimes on the victims themselves. As we began to gather with those who had been abused, we began to learn.

We learned that most of them did not want to be called victims. The term “victim” connoted a person who is damaged, diminished, somehow inadequate and certainly rejected. These men and women preferred to be known as survivors. Someone who had been wounded but had taken measures to move in the direction of healing in order to feel whole again.

We learned that they wanted to be listened to, to actually be heard and understood. They needed to know that someone out there truly cared for them, that they were accepted for what they are and not categorized by what had happened to them.

They already knew that the institutional church, the hierarchy, had allowed this abuse to continue for decades – denying that it was happening, hiding the truth behind confidential payments, and ignoring the plight of the victims – and that the hierarchy was more interested in concealing the crimes and protecting the criminals in an effort to protect the Church from scandal and insulating the laity from the truth.

We learned that by just going out with the survivors, reaching out to them and acknowledging their pain and suffering we could, in fact, make a difference -- a HUGE difference. We were afraid at first that there was really not much that we could do to help them. We couldn't erase the damage that had been done to their bodies, psyches and souls. We couldn't provide therapeutic healing, nor could we change their emotional condition significantly.

What could we do?

We could stand with them and support them in their quest for justice, compassion and healing. We could try to empathize with the depth of the pain they endured. We knew we could not experience that pain ourselves but we could sense the level of the pain in their voices, in their faces and in their words.

We could assist them in demanding that our Church admit what had been done to them and release the documents that had been secreted away and would substantiate their claims so that justice could be realized.

We could demand the removal from ministry of the perpetrators themselves, as well as all who were complicit in any way in covering up these crimes, obstructing justice and continuing the abuse emotionally and psychologically that they had caused both spiritually and physically.

We participated in Solidarity marches with the survivors, marches that took us from the front doors of cathedrals to the seats of political power to demand justice from the courts, elimination of statutes of limitations and accountability of the bishops for their abandonment of the survivors and their efforts to conceal the crimes, hide the abusers and protect the image of the Church at all costs.

We stood on the sidewalks in front of churches, cathedrals and chanceries, hand-in-hand with our wounded brothers and sisters and begged pleaded, cajoled and demanded that the hierarchy accept responsibility for these crimes and take positive steps to provide true healing assistance to the survivors, release all pertinent information that identified the perpetrators, their present locations and facts substantiating the allegations against them. We asked the bishops to adopt a posture of true pastoral care and abandon their position of corporate cover-up.

We acknowledge that there is much more that we can do.

We must continue to hear the stories of abuse from the mouths of the survivors. Only by hearing their stories and subjecting ourselves to the pain and suffering associated with these crimes can we achieve the necessary level of awareness, motivation and commitment to continue our mission in support of our Goal # 1.

We need to pray for the survivors, in accordance with our mission statement, which calls upon us to be always grounded in prayer and attentive to the Spirit.

We need to cooperate with survivor support organizations that exist outside our Church such as, SNAP, The Healing Alliance and others providing much support and assistance to those abused. Over the past three years many affiliates have devised numerous fundraising activities enabling them to make significant contributions to these agencies. These funds have assisted the survivors in obtaining therapy and attending support agency meetings.

Monies have been collected at such events as healing Masses, the Mass on Boston Common, liturgies at VOTF conferences, including this one, and these funds have been apportioned to SNAP and the Healing Alliance.

We must provide assistance to survivors wishing to come forward to report their abuse to diocesan officials or to non-church based programs by directing them to appropriate agencies and helping to provide a safe, comfortable environment.

We need to be knowledgeable about diocesan policies and procedures concerning reporting abuse and applying for payments for therapy.

We need to monitor our diocese to determine if compliance with the Bishop's Charter is being met and whether effective audits are being accomplished.

We need to ensure that records concerning abusive priests are maintained and available, that they are not routinely destroyed and that all pertinent records are released to civil authorities.

We need most of all to keep these atrocities alive in our memories and to educate those with whom we are in contact on the extent of this crisis. Our primary responsibility must be to support the survivors in any way we can and to end this era of secrecy, deceit and denial that continues to serve only to make the situation worse than it might have been.