

Background

At its 2014 conference, VOTF addressed the issue that healing has been largely lost in the struggle to redress the sexual abuse of children in the Catholic Church. VOTF Trustees committed to developing opportunities that could provide healing options for those wounded by clergy sexual abuse of children and/or hierarchical malfeasance in response to it.

VOTF is collaborating with a small group that formed after the conference to advance a path of healing based on principles and practices of Restorative Justice. In Boston in the fall 2014, VOTF is hosting a workshop led by this group to test a particular Restorative Justice model called a Healing Circle.

Healing and Justice

Healing and justice are terms that have a variety of meanings to different individuals, but experiences of both are critical to spiritual, psychological, and physical recovery from abuse—not to mention that they are core teachings and practices of Jesus.

Most victims/survivors of clergy sexual abuse report that without justice, there is no healing. Yet society's traditional justice systems typically pass over the healing needs of victims.

Restorative Justice

Restorative Justice differs from traditional justice models in that it is victim-centered and enables all those affected by a harm to seek ways to repair the harm and restore relationships, including accountability for those responsible for harm.

The practice is rooted in the patterns of justice applied by indigenous peoples around the world, but it is becoming more prevalent as traditional justice systems fall short of the needs of participants.

Restorative Justice Models

Two models are especially relevant to the needs of those seeking healing from the wounds of sexual abuse and/or related hierarchical malfeasance.

One is the **Healing Circle** and it is most useful when those harmed seek healing through a shared conversation that allows each participant to express, in a safe forum, their experience of harm and their healing needs regarding a **pattern of sexual abuse and malfeasance**.

Another is called a **Restorative Justice Conference** and it is most useful when those harmed seek healing through a joint effort to repair the harm and restore relationships regarding a **specific incident of abuse and/or malfeasance**.

Restorative Justice Working Group

The working group includes the VOTF Development Director, a former VOTF Trustee, two priests, two Catholic laypersons, and a Methodist minister—all of whom have limited to substantial experience with Restorative Justice models.

In Boston, Janine Geske, a retired Wisconsin Supreme Court Justice, a professor at the Marquette University Law School, and a Restorative Justice practitioner will facilitate the Healing Circle. Participants include a variety of those deeply wounded by the clergy sexual abuse scandal: victims/survivors, family members or supporters of victims, clergy abusers, other priests, hierarchical leaders, and lay persons.

VOTF's Goal

Overall, our goal is to develop and promote concrete models for healing the wounds of sexual abuse in faith communities in the Catholic Church.