

## Ministering to the ministers

Beth Griffin | Feb. 27, 2010



Daniel A. Kidd

Who ministers to the ministers? Where can priests and religious safely turn when they are depressed or addicted?

Guest House, a 54-year-old organization headquartered in Lake Orion, Mich., specializes in treating priests, religious, deacons and seminarians with addictions. Upper Room, a new crisis hotline based in Joliet, Ill., provides paraprofessional counseling, information, referral, suicide prevention and reassurance for elderly priests, brothers and deacons.

Priests and vowed religious are at least as susceptible to the grip of addiction as laypeople, and although they may be more reluctant to accept help, they have an excellent success rate if they complete treatment that respects their vocational call. Daniel A. Kidd, president and CEO of Guest House, said, "We affirm the vocation of our clients and integrate their vocation and commitment with the 12-step program."

He added, "Anyone can take a 12-step program and make it work, but when they can connect their spirituality to the recovery process, it's a 'Eureka' moment."

Since 1956, the lay-led Guest House has helped 7,300 people recover from addictions to alcohol, drugs, gambling and compulsive eating. It now has four treatment locations in three states. Its educational affiliates, Guest House Institute and the National Catholic Council on Alcoholism and Related Drug Problems, provide programs for dioceses, seminaries and religious communities, and other resources, such as the free 30-page booklet "Prayers for Addicted Persons and Their Loved Ones."

According to Kidd, 10 percent of the American population struggles with addictions. He said the corresponding percentage among priests and religious "is similar and may be higher than the general population due to ethnic background, not lifestyle." Alcohol is the most prevalent addiction and people from ethnic groups associated with a higher occurrence of alcoholism, i.e. the Irish, Polish, Germans and Eastern Europeans, are abundantly represented among priests and religious, Kidd said. Addictive behavior can be caused by genetic factors, as well as childhood trauma, such as a car accident, death, verbal abuse, or inadequate economic support.

Addictions mirror the societies in which they occur, said Kidd, with the Internet feeding compulsive gambling,

pornography, shopping and computer use to an extent unimaginable 25 years ago.

Kidd said a typical priest client at the Guest House facility in Rochester, Minn., is 58 years old, ordained for 30 years. He has a history of increasing alcohol consumption over at least 20 years and "an incident or crisis occurs that comes to the attention of the bishop or provincial and they're pretty quick to get him here," said Kidd.

Women religious at the Lake Orion Guest House campus are likely to be 67 years old, with addictions to one or more things including alcohol, prescription drugs, gambling, eating, shopping and cluttering. Kidd said a smaller percentage of women religious than men have a problem with alcohol. He said there tends to be a slower buildup of addictive behavior with women religious.

Stephanie Anderson, a therapist at Guest House, said there are sometimes delays in getting women into treatment because "women are so charitable they let people die because they don't want to confront a person's addictive behavior."

Anderson said that when women get to Guest House, being with other women religious provides a safety net and the sisters "feel much more free to do the work they need to do."

Sister Carol, a former Guest House client who belongs to a congregation in New England, appreciated the sole focus on women religious. "It helped that I never had to address or defend being a Catholic nun or talk about [the dynamics of] being addicted in a community or congregation, because we were all about the same thing. My full attention got to be focused on figuring out if I was an alcoholic and then doing the program."

Sister Carol said the nonjudgmental evaluation period before she agreed to enter treatment intrigued her. "Nobody pointed fingers," she said. "They helped me investigate where my weaknesses were and offered me a program that was academic, emotional and spiritual."



She has been sober for seven years since her stay at Guest House. She said the holistic approach helped her develop spiritually, and sessions on the physiological underpinnings of addiction helped her understand and articulate what she experienced.

The Guest House program entails a three- to four-month stay at one of the group's campuses and follow-up care that ranges from residential transitional living to return visits to the campus six, 12 or 18 months after primary treatment. Clients attend 12-step meetings with local sponsors in the communities near Guest House, and are expected to continue doing so when they return home.

Kidd said Guest House deals with "the body, the soul and the mind as part of the process of putting a person back together." Guest House has a high success rate compared to other treatment programs, he said, but added, "Addictions are chronic illnesses. They're not acute, so they're never cured."

Kidd said there are 40-50 people in Guest House facilities at most times, which is almost twice the number who were in treatment when he came aboard in 1995. He said Guest House has developed new methods of treating people with addictions during its 53 years.

Guest House treats priests, brothers, deacons and seminarians with addictions at its Rochester location, whose proximity to the Mayo Clinic affords the opportunity for diagnosis of accompanying medical problems. Women religious are served at the Guest House campus in Lake Orion. Clergy and religious with a dual diagnosis of addiction and psychiatric disorder are referred to a Guest House program at St. John Vianney Center in

Downingtown, Pa. A transitional residence in Lake Orion offers a structured environment to men at risk of relapse.

Guest House is supported by private contributors and the dioceses and congregations of its clients, according to Kidd. It offers an insurance-style plan that allows dioceses and religious communities to cap costs for treatment by paying a monthly per-member fee. In return, Guest House will treat as many individuals as the congregation or diocese needs.

The Upper Room Crisis Hotline (888-808-8724) opened in 2008 to serve elderly priests, brothers and deacons who live alone or in small groups. The Upper Room name was chosen as a reminder of "the place where the apostles gathered for mutual support and reflection," said director and full-time unpaid staffer Sr. Mary Frances Seeley.

Seeley, a Sister of St. Francis of Mary Immaculate and a suicidologist who holds a doctorate in law, policy and society from Northeastern University in Boston, founded her first crisis hotline in Florida in 1970. She has established and maintained hotlines in several states and trained thousands of hotline volunteers.

Seeley said she was recruited by members of the National Federation of Priests' Councils to provide a service that includes compassionate listening, counseling, information, referral, suicide prevention and reassurance.

The hotline operates 24/7 year-round and gets calls from across the country and around the world, she said. "This is a place to call to talk, to practice language, to deal with homesickness. The volunteers are not junior psychologists, they're here as paraprofessional counselors or listeners. We are nonjudgmental and nondirective. We'll help callers to examine their issues," she explained.

The Upper Room has 45 volunteers who have completed a 16-session training course designed and taught by Seeley. She said the mostly middle-aged volunteers are drawn from the ranks of priests, deacons, women religious and laity. "Their commonality is they love priests and want to help," she said.

Upper Room's most popular program is its Sunshine Service, which provides daily calls to check on the safety and well-being of priests who have requested such reassurance. Volunteers use facilities provided by the University of St. Francis in Joliet.

The Upper Room operates on a modest budget, financed by contributions and the proceeds of an annual concert by singing priests, Seeley said. Additional funds, she said, could let more people know about availability of the Upper Room. "It's difficult to get the word out," she said.

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