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Ohio Dignity group removes presider

Zoe Ryan | May. 13, 2011

A former Roman Catholic priest has stepped down as a worship leader at the DignityUSA affiliate in Dayton, Ohio, after a former member complained about a substantiated allegation of child abuse in his past.

Ellis Harsham no longer holds a leadership position at Living Beatitudes Community, a ministry of Dignity Dayton, after former member Laura Grimes brought to the board?s attention that he had been removed from ordained ministry in 1994 because of a substantiated allegation of sexual abuse of a minor in the Cincinnati archdiocese.

The incident has prompted DignityUSA, an organization for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Catholics, to urge all its chapters to review the records of their presiders. In a letter to all chapters, DignityUSA president Mark Matson asked chapter leaders to check their list of presiders against a database of clergy abusers maintained by the victims advocacy group BishopAccountability.org [1] and to remove presiders who have substantiated allegations of child sexual abuse.

Thomas Stricker, a presider for Living Beatitudes Community, said the community is making every effort to install safe church policies and safe environment training.

Harsham was part of Living Beatitudes Community for 10 to 12 years, Stricker said. Stricker said he had been aware that there were allegations of misconduct in Harsham?s past, but did not know that any allegation of sexual abuse was substantiated.

The past allegation against him ?is a recent understanding by all of us,? Stricker said. The community didn?t know about any allegation being substantiated until Grimes brought the issue to them, he said.

NCR attempted to but could not contact Harsham.

In an April 24 statement, Living Beatitudes Community said, ?We realize that we must put safe church procedures and training in place to ensure that we adhere to DignityUSA?s policy and keep everyone in our midst safe.?

The Living Beatitudes Community attracts 25 to 30 people to weekly services and children do not usually attend, Stricker said.

Grimes, who is an Old Catholic bishop and also a member of DignityUSA, joined the community as a presider in July 2010 shortly after moving to Dayton. She stopped attending in January.

Grimes said she heard of allegations against Harsham April 14. She investigated, learned an allegation was substantiated and took her findings to a leader at Living Beatitudes Community the next day.

She said she was concerned for children -- her own included -- who attend community gatherings as well as

vulnerable adults.

The board met to discuss what Grimes had learned and to discuss steps to take, and then Grimes met with board members before services April 17. The board removed Harsham from leadership April 19 and issued a public statement April 24.

Grimes said she felt the group bullied and silenced her when she expressed her concern, and she took the story to the local media.

The Living Beatitudes Community is in accord with DignityUSA?s policies, said DignityUSA executive director Marianne Duddy-Burke.

DignityUSA sent a letter to its chapters April 26 urging them to review its policy on people with allegations of sexual misconduct. The organization will be reviewing its policy at its July meeting, the letter also noted.

The policy does not bar from leadership ?any person who has been simply accused of child molestation.? If an allegation is substantiated, the policy says, chapter leaders ?must make it clear to this member that he/she is welcome in the faith community but may not serve as a presider.?

The Living Beatitudes Community began when a few adults started meeting in 1994 in homes. The community joined DignityUSA in 2006, which is when the name ?Living Beatitudes Community? came into existence, Stricker said.

The community rents the basement in Christ Episcopal Church in inner-city Dayton. The members of Christ Episcopal know what?s occurring within Living Beatitudes Community but they are not anxious, said the Rev. John Paddock, rector of the church.

The church is located in the inner city and has many people moving through it, so they have policies in place to maintain safety, Paddock said.

In 1993, Stephen Cook accused Harsham of abuse that occurred when Cook was a seminarian in the early 1970s. Other accusations were reported after Cook?s, but only one involved sexual contact or conduct with a minor according to Ohio law, a 1994 archdiocesan statement said. That allegation was substantiated by the Cincinnati archdiocese, and in 1994 Harsham was put on administrative leave of absence.

Harsham voluntarily requested to be removed permanently from the priesthood and in 2006 Pope Benedict XVI granted the request, according to the Cincinnati archdiocese?s Web site.

Once a clergy member is laicized, the archdiocese does not check in with organizations that person may be involved with -- ?he?s out of our hands,? said Dan Andriacco, communications director for the Cincinnati archdiocese.

Andriacco said that Harsham?s case was very well-known at the time. Cook had also accused Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago, who was archbishop of Cincinnati at one time, of sexual abuse but later dropped that accusation.

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Links:

[1] http://BishopAccountability.org