

Abusers' payroll

EDITORIAL

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In 1983, Reverend Gordon MacRae was involved in a child-molestation incident in Hampton. The victim was a 14-year-old boy. Shortly afterward, the Diocese of Manchester assigned MacRae to St. Bernard's Church in Keene, where he became associate pastor. No one at St. Bernard's knew about the Hampton matter, but church officials did. They had even notified the N.H. Attorney General's Office, which decided not to prosecute.

Four years later, MacRae became acting parish administrator at St. Bernard's, replacing Reverend Steven W. Scruton, who had just been convicted of indecent exposure and was being sent off for what was described as intensive counseling. Unbeknownst to local parishioners, Scruton had been arrested in 1984 after a similar incident in Londonderry, but charges were dropped. When he left Keene, Scruton moved to Dover. But, instead of being counseled, he became a counselor himself — to sex offenders in a Massachusetts prison.

In Keene, MacRae took on a new assignment in addition to his church duties. He was named executive director of Monadnock Region Substance Abuse Inc. That position brought him into contact with troubled children at the Spofford Hall rehabilitation center, where he also said mass. The Diocese of Manchester raised no alarms.

MacRae was arrested in November 1988 and pleaded guilty to offering to pay a child to have sex with him. Keene city officials then publicly urged the Diocese of Manchester to make sure that MacRae's future church assignments, if any, would not bring him into contact with any more young people.

MacRae left the area, but eventually his past caught up with him. In 1994, he was convicted of one count of felonious sexual assault and five counts of aggravated felonious sexual assault — for acts that had taken place during "pastoral counseling sessions" when he was at St. Bernard's. He is now serving a prison sentence of 33 to 67 years. And, as the Concord Monitor reported in a story published in last Sunday's Sentinel, he is still being paid by the Catholic church.

In many parts of the country, priests who have been found guilty of sexual misconduct are defrocked — which is to say, they are removed from the priesthood and taken off the church payroll. But in New Hampshire, no priest has been defrocked during the recent decades of sex-abuse scandals. MacRae's situation is not unusual. The Monitor reports that many other abusive priests in prison and on administrative leave are still receiving payments from the church.

This, of course, is the church's business. The Diocese of Manchester is within its rights to use its resources to comfort abusive priests in their declining years. However, as with the earlier practice of shuffling sexual predators from parish to parish, the church has not made this particular policy clear to church members. And that troubles Anne Pullen of the Concord chapter of the lay group Voice of the Faithful.

"When you look at Boston, and you have priests being defrocked there, why do we not have priests being defrocked here?" Pullen asked the Monitor. "And where are the people in the pews? The layperson in this church is saying, 'Move on. Stop talking about this.' But there is no accountability."

That personal dismay reflects broader social concerns regarding an institution whose capacity for good is damaged by its accommodation of what is indisputably bad.