

A letter to the Cameron House community
concerning sex abuse or molestation
by former Director F. S. Dick Wichman

June 2004

We wish to inform you of a matter that has been and continues to be of concern to all of us who participated in the Cameron House Youth Ministries from the 1940's through the 1980's. From 1947 to 1977, F. S. Dick Wichman served as the Executive Director of Donaldina Cameron House in San Francisco. During his tenure, he was viewed as a strong, charismatic leader who brought tremendous vitality, energy and commitment to establishing a hugely successful and popular youth ministry in Chinatown. In July 1977, he formally retired from Cameron House and the Presbyterian Church in Chinatown.

Late in 1987, ten years after Wichman's retirement, public allegations began to surface, accusing him of a long history of past molestations and sexual misconduct. These allegations were made known to the Presbytery of San Francisco, the governing church body which had formal authority and oversight over him as a Presbyterian minister and over Cameron House as a mission of the Presbyterian Church. The Presbytery of San Francisco formed an investigative committee to look into the allegations of sexual misconduct. In November 1988, as the Presbytery was about to bring charges against Wichman, he denied the charges and removed himself from his ordination as a Presbyterian minister.

Because he was no longer ordained, the Presbyterian judicial process was terminated prematurely, and there was never a trial or formal judgment by the church as to his guilt or innocence. Also in 1988, the Presbytery consulted with the San Francisco District Attorney's office, which determined that it could not bring criminal charges against Wichman because of statute-of-limitation provisions in place at that time. The Presbytery shared its findings with the Presbyterian Church in Chinatown and Cameron House after a worship service in December 1988. Newspaper articles were published and Cameron House corresponded with its alumni and parents of youth in the program in early 1989 to inform them of the allegations against Wichman and his decision to renounce his ordination.

In the years following public disclosure of Wichman's sex abuse, Cameron House did not know how to effectively reach out to his victims. Though at least nine victims had been identified during the Presbyterian investigation, the Cameron House community became divided between those who believed the victims and those who believed Wichman. Some preferred to think of his unsolicited sexual advances as signs of affection rather than abuse. Others accused victims of exaggerating their experience or of bringing the abuse on themselves. This left some victims feeling isolated, and many chose not to be identified. After 1988, the controversy finally settled in as an unresolved, unspoken disgrace, which was collectively devastating to all.

From our conversations in the community and with Cameron House alumni, this issue still lingers on people's minds and continues to hang as a shadow over what we do. Because of this, in early 2002, the Board of Directors felt that to move forward, there needed to be an open acknowledgment of this part of our history to help all parts of our community be reconciled and become a single community again. Only truth can break down the walls of silence that have separated us.

In January 2002 the Cameron House Board appointed a HEALING TASK FORCE to explore what we as a community might do to begin to mend the many broken relationships, the hurts and the pain which this history of sex abuse created. Hearing of the work of the Healing Task Force, some victims voluntarily came forward to talk about sex abuse by Wichman. We are grateful for their courage in disclosing and sharing their experiences of molestation or abuse. Their willingness to share painful memories has brought truth to light and guided the Task Force's recommendations for healing of victims and the Cameron House community. The Task Force recommended an apology to victims. This has been written and sent to victims known to us, but we were not able to send it to victims unknown to us. The Task Force also recommended that we issue this public statement to Cameron House alumni:

On behalf of the governing board of Donaldina Cameron House, WE ARE SORRY and wish to express our deep regret for the pain and anguish brought upon our community by F. S. Dick Wichman. He used his position as Executive Director to sexually abuse and molest youth for personal gratification. The abuse was not only a betrayal of our trust but was also a gross misuse of power and authority.

We are glad that some victims have found SUPPORT AND HELP to begin steps towards healing. Some have found other survivors to validate that they were not the only ones Wichman abused and have begun healing with each other's support. If you are a survivor of abuse who would like to establish such contact with other victims, a meeting for victims and survivors will be held at 6:00 p.m. on Sunday, June 27, at the Presbyterian Church in Chinatown. The Rev. Dr. Robin Crawford will facilitate, and dinner will be served. Cameron House can also provide a list of therapists that deal with sex abuse.

As the Board and staff, WE ARE COMMITTED to making sure that nothing like this happens again at Cameron House. Our personnel policy clearly defines a code of conduct and specifies what constitutes sexual harassment. We have also implemented and require annual training on sex abuse and reporting requirements for all staff and volunteers. In 1996 the Presbytery of San Francisco adopted policies and procedures on clergy sex abuse and misconduct and has required all ministers to receive training on sex abuse and misconduct.

Only by honestly acknowledging the past and refusing to perpetuate a culture of secrecy will we ensure that sex abuse never occurs again. Unless sex abuse is openly discussed, perpetrators hide behind a cloak of silence that perpetuates their misconduct. We invite you to read the Final Report of the Healing Task Force including its recommendations for healing activities. This report describes what the Task Force learned over nearly two years of meetings. The report

is now available at Cameron House. If you have questions about the June 27 survivors meeting or suggestions for other healing activities, please feel free to contact Doreen Der-McLeod at doreen@cameronhouse.org or (415) 781-0401, Ext. 135. Please know that any and all communications with us on this matter will remain confidential.

If you know of interested or affected individuals who may not be on our mailing list and therefore have not received this letter, please do give them a copy.

130 years ago, Cameron House began its work with victims of sex abuse in the Chinatown community. Today that work continues with Chinese and Vietnamese victims of domestic violence. In the future, we expect to hold support groups and workshops on sex abuse and healing for Cameron House and the broader Asian community. More than ever, we feel called to a ministry of helping Asian victims heal from abuse. We invite your continued support and participation in this ministry. Details of future activities will be posted on our website, www.cameronhouse.org.

As a community of faith whose theology is grounded in the Easter experience of the resurrection of Christ, we know and trust that God walks with us in the depths of despair and can transform that despair into hope and life.

Sincerely,

Doreen Der-McLeod, MSW
Executive Director

The Rev. Gregory L. Chan
President, Board of Directors