

ARTICLE FOR CURRENT

Cameron House Reaches Out to Victims

Healing Task Force Final Report on Wichman Sex Abuse

In early 2002, the Cameron House Board created a Healing Task Force to explore what we as a community might do to further mend the many hurts, pain and broken relationships brought on by the sex abuse perpetrated by former Executive Director F. S. Dick Wichman. Serving from 1947 to 1977, Wichman had been viewed widely as a strong, charismatic leader who brought tremendous vitality, energy and commitment in establishing a hugely successful and popular youth ministry in Chinatown.

In 1987, ten years after Wichman's retirement, public allegations had surfaced accusing him of a long history of sexual misconduct and molestations of boys and young men in the Cameron House program. After the Presbyterian Church investigated these allegations and was about to bring formal charges against him, Wichman denied the charges and removed himself from his ordination as a Presbyterian minister.

Because Wichman was no longer ordained, the Presbyterian judicial process was terminated, and there was never a trial or formal judgment by the church as to his guilt or innocence. And because of statute-of-limitation provisions in place at that time, the San Francisco District Attorney's office determined it could not bring criminal charges against him either.

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 Wichman's 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 in 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 a more open acknowledgment of this part of our history. The Healing Task Force was established to study and make recommendations regarding how to help individuals and the Cameron House and Presbyterian Church Community heal from the wounds of sex abuse, sexual molestation, the betrayal of trust and the abuse of authority.

The members of the Healing Task Force were the Rev. Andrew Choy, Executive Director Doreen Der-McLeod, Sharlene Hall, Rev. Willie Ng, Jeannie Choy Tate, Rev. Henry Solomon Wong and the Rev. Dr. Bradford L. Woo. After a year and a half of meetings, the Healing Task Force published its Final Report, which the Board of Directors has adopted.

This Final Report chronicles the story of Wichman's abuse at Cameron House, including

frank testimony from numerous victims. The report also includes information on clergy sex abuse, the feelings and needs of victims/survivors, and theological reflections on evil, love, forgiveness and justice. Most importantly, the Healing Task Force Report includes a list of specific recommendations for effective healing. This Final Report is now available at Cameron House.

Following up on the work of the Healing Task Force, the Cameron House Board has created a separate “Healing Implementation Committee” to implement the recommendations made by the Task Force. Already, this Committee and the Board have issued a private letter of apology to known victims, as well as an open, public letter to the Cameron House alumni community, which may be viewed on the Cameron House website.

The members of the Healing Implementation Committee are Executive Director Doreen Der-McLeod, Rev. Katherine J. Runyeon (Stated Clerk of the Presbytery of San Francisco), Dr. Benjamin Tong, Jeannie Choy Tate, Rev. Henry Solomon Wong, Dr. Margaret Emerson and the Rev. Dr. Bradford L. Woo.

We have been gladdened that some victims have found support to begin steps towards healing. Some have found other victims to validate that they were not the only ones Wichman abused and have begun healing with each other’s support. If you would like to establish such personal contact with other victims, or would like to participate in individual or group counseling, or have 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.

Only by honestly acknowledging the past and refusing to perpetuate a culture of secrecy will we ensure that such abuse never occurs again. Unless sex abuse is openly discussed, perpetrators hide behind a cloak of silence that perpetuates their misconduct. In the meantime, the Cameron House staff has taken proactive steps to prevent future situations of abuse. Clear policies on what constitute sexual harassment and a code of conduct are clearly defined in our personnel policy. We have also implemented and require training on sex abuse and reporting requirements annually for all staff and volunteers.

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.

You may also be kept informed of healing activities in the future through the Cameron House website, www.cameronhouse.org.