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1st Place

2003 Finalist Cassels Award
The horror that was James Porter

Boston Archdiocese molestation case serves as painful reminder to some Porter victims nearly 10 years after his conviction

When Peter Calderone sees the accusers of former Boston priest John Geoghan on news broadcasts, he pictures his former classmates at St. Mary’s School in North Attleboro.

“It’s the same story as 1992,” Calderone said. “The only things different are the names and faces.”

Calderone was one of more than 100 victims of former priest James Porter who went public 10 years ago with details of sexual abuse during Porter’s three years at St. Mary’s in the early 1960s, and his subsequent years at two other parishes in the Diocese of Fall River.

The pressure they put on the Church and on the legal system led to Porter being found in Minnesota, charged with sexual crimes in Massachusetts, and later sent to prison after he pled guilty to molesting 28 children three decades earlier. He is now an inmate at the Massachusetts Treatment Center in Bridgewater.

Now these victims know that at the same time they were accusing Porter publicly to bring him to justice and force changes in their Church, Cardinal Bernard Law of the Archdiocese of Boston knew of years of sexual abuse allegations against Geoghan, and was still transferring him, and even treating him kindly, according to documents just released.

Geoghan was recently found guilty of indecent assault and faces other criminal charges, plus civil suits alleging he molested 130 children over many years. Cardinal Law has apologized for transferring Geoghan to other parishes, and has issued a zero tolerance policy on clergy abuse to strengthen the policy he adopted in 1993.

Porter victims wonder what took him so long.

They see many similarities between the Geoghan case and their own.

“Here we go again,” said John Robitaille of Rhode Island, a Porter survivor who became one of the spokesmen for the group during the national media blitz the case received.

Back in the 1960s, the Church could claim that it did not understand pedophilia, he said, but not in the 1990s.

“What is your excuse now?” he asks his Church.

As in the Geoghan case, Porter was transferred from parish to parish as allegations surfaced, but church officials never reached out to the children who were his victims.

“It baffles me why someone was not there with a sense of what is right and wrong to say, what about these kids,” Robitaille said. “We were collateral damage.”

The fact that the Boston victims are coming forward is heartening yet heart-wrenching to him and other former North Attleboro school children who, nearly 40 years later, have come to terms with the crimes Porter committed against them, but who had hoped it would never happen again.

Three who were interviewed and who were part of the core group that first went public in 1992 now say they have found some sense of peace even though they will never forget. Overall, they said, Porter’s victims have had their share of the problems usually related to abuse, but for the most part, they are very functional and successful in their lives.

Yet they are not sure about all of them. They suspect that many more than 100 children were abused, but the rest never said a word, at least not publicly.

Mike Whalen, now a Rhode Island resident and supervisor of the foster care program for the Department of Social Services office in Attleboro, said some of the victims still say their lives were ruined by Porter, but he is not one of them.

“Time puts it in its place,” he said. “I don’t think about my anger towards James Porter. It feels
settled for me. I will be okay now. My life is not ruined."

"While he is a different person because of the experience, he does not see his entire life as having been shaped by it.

"We need to take responsibility for who we are," Whalen said. "A lot of other things have made me who I am, and not only what happened when I was 10."

But the memories come to the surface whenever he hears about another case of abuse, like the ones now being disclosed in Boston.

"The sadness never goes away," Whalen said. "It's deep inside you. It's part of you. If you touch it, it hurts. It's settled, but occasionally something raises up the pain."

To Calderone, who now lives in Attleboro, it's like catching his breath, then being punched in the stomach.

Yet life for him is calmer now, and the abuse is in its place.

"It stops being the focal point of your life," Calderone said.

He used to make his days so structured that every moment was filled, and used to get angry if someone didn't do what needed to be done.

Now, "I am more at ease with myself," Calderone said. "I still get angry, but I am able to relax in my life."

Life is good for Robitaille. He is remarried, has a successful business, and enjoys a great relationship with his family and friends.

"I was fortunate," he said. "I was able to work my way through being a victim, a survivor and beyond, and to put it in perspective."

He is now at peace with what happened, and with what he did to bring the abuse to light.

"It made me a stronger person," he said. "It gave me the resolve to make a difference, to make change."

Many of the Porter victims have gotten on with their lives, he said, but some are still stuck in the victim mode, and their marriages, their jobs and their spiritual lives have suffered.

"I see the carnage still out there," Robitaille said. "The Porter case is history. But there are a lot of 50-year-old men and women still feeling the scars of what that man did."

According to Lisa Rinaldi Brown, a licensed social worker and coordinator of the sexual abuse team at Boston Medical Center's child psychiatry department, the impacts of abuse can be immediate, or can surface all through life.

Victims, she said, may experience intrusive thoughts and recollections, nightmares, flashbacks, anxiety and depression, and a numbing feeling toward people and life. Over the long term, she said, they may have relationship issues, problems with intimacy, or substance abuse. If they were abused by a member of the same sex, they may also question their sexual orientation.

In general, she said, there is a sense of sadness, a feeling of being betrayed, and a loss of faith.

"It robs children of all sense of safety, security and protection," Brown said. "Once that is lost, it is very hard to get back, to regain a sense of faith in other people."

For many of the victims, their loss of faith centers on the Catholic Church.

Robitaille said the Porter experience had a huge impact on his spirituality.

"I am no longer a practicing anything, but I am spiritually stronger than ever. I pray every day," he said. "I believe in God, but not the God of my youth. My spirituality is a direct line to a higher power. I don't need priests, rules, an organization or anyone telling me what is right and wrong. I know what is right and wrong."

Calderone does not go to church, and has difficulty even entering one. But he considers himself a non-practicing Catholic, and still believes in God.

"What upsets me is that people are still blind to the fact that there are problems in the Catholic Church," he said. "A lot of people don't want to believe it. That is upsetting to me."

While growing up, he always felt as though he had done something bad, that he should go to confession, that he committed mortal sins.

Now he knows better. "I didn't do a darn thing wrong," he said.

Abuse by priests involves a different kind of betrayal, said Thomas Plante, editor of the book on clergy sexual abuse, "Bless Me Father for I Have Sinned," and a professor of psychology at Santa Clara University and Stanford University School of Medicine. Born and raised in Rhode Island, he has a relative among the Porter victims, and has professionally treated both abusive priests, and victims of abuse.

Plante said priests are supposed to be the most trustworthy persons in a child's life, and are seen as being closer to God than others, so abuse means an even deeper break of trust.
"We expect priests to be of the highest moral standing," he said. "To see the same person celebrate Mass and administer the sacraments is such a contradiction."

The result, he said, is often spiritual trauma. Some victims can’t pray, can no longer believe in God, and can’t even step inside a church, a situation he sees as tragic.

"They feel damaged by the priest, and damaged by the institution as well," he said. Robitaille said he was brought up to view a priest as God on earth, so when he was abused by one, it was as though God was doing it to him.

"I was scared to death to go to my parents and say a priest was doing that," he said. "That was sacrilegious."

Whalen no longer goes to church, and no longer considers himself Catholic.

"The church made that decision for me," he said. "It was made by the person who put Porter in our parish." When Porter came to St. Mary’s, he said, church officials knew there had been allegations against him during his time as a seminarian at Cathedral Camp in Freetown.

Whalen cannot forget the day Porter was wrestling with him, and another priest came to the room, asked Porter what he was doing, and reminded him he was not supposed to be alone with boys.

"They knew," he said, but all they did was move him to other parishes.

"They did not do anything for the kids he raped and sodomized," he said.

Whalen is still cynical about the actions of the Church regarding sexual abuse.

"Cardinal Law is not saying ‘mea culpa’ because of a concern for the victims," he said, but instead is apologizing because documents about Geoghan’s case are being released and the archdiocese is facing law suits.

"Cardinal Law is trying to save himself financially," Whalen said.

The victims recall how Cardinal Law in 1992 called down the wrath of God on the media covering the Porter case. Yet now they know that at that time, Cardinal Law knew of accusations against Geoghan.

"Ten years later he is beginning to see the light," Robitaille said. "Why did it take so long?"

After Cardinal Law made that statement in 1992, Robitaille said he did some serious thinking about his public accusations against Porter.

"I took a walk in a meadow and had a conversation with God," he said. "Then I felt a calmness come over me."

From then on, he said, he felt he had a spiritual guide helping him through it all.

"Something spiritual gave me the guts to do it," he said.

As publicity swirled around the victims, they were challenged, criticized, labeled Catholic bashers, and accused of making the allegations just for the money they eventually got from the Fall River Diocese in settlements.

The victims said money was not even mentioned when they first started meeting and making public statements.

"We just wanted to get the perpetrator," Calderone said. "We wanted to nail Porter."

The goal, Whalen said, was to stop him.

"Our interest was to find out if Porter was still out there abusing kids, and to make sure it did not happen again," he said.

Going public through the national media put pressure on both the Church and on law enforcement, they said, and both had to respond.

"We made the system work," Whalen said. "It did what it was supposed to do. The man is in jail."

Calderone calls it a job well done.

"We made Porter and the Church accountable," Calderone said. "He is where he needs to be, and where everyone else needs him to be."

Robitaille finds it sad that money even played a role. But he said the lawyers told them that "the only thing people pay attention to is being whacked with a huge judgment. It’s the only thing that makes them change."

While the terms of the settlement were kept secret, the victims say the amounts they received were not large, and nowhere near the amounts of law suits today.

"Ask anyone if they would rather have cash or not have Porter in their life. I know what the answer would be," Calderone said.

As part of the settlement, the victims said they wanted the Fall River Diocese to adopt policies to prevent and deal with abuse in the future. The intent, Whalen said, was to protect children.
Eventually, settlements were reached with about 100 victims. Bishop Sean O’Malley, who arrived in the diocese in August of 1992, three months after the Porter story broke, said Friday he arrived with the intention of instituting policies. His first order of business, he said, was to meet with the victims, and to draft the documents, which were later adopted.

The policies call for immediate reporting of allegations to civil authorities, placing the priest on leave, establishing a review board to look into accusations, and not allowing any diagnosed pedophile to minister either within the diocese or outside of it.

The diocese also issued a policy in 1995 requiring all clergy, workers and volunteers who deal with children to undergo sexual abuse training, and to submit to Criminal Offender Record Information checks, known as CORI checks.

The Porter survivors are gratified that they had a part in those policies and that they influenced other changes in society regarding sexual abuse. They now wonder if Geoghan’s accusers would have come forward if the former children of St. Mary’s School had not gone public 10 years ago.

“I think that as a group of people, the Porter survivors are heroes,” Robitaille said. “No one was looking for glory. It was outreach. They gave each other the courage to step forward.”
A secret no more

Parish priest called it love but Norton woman says it was abuse starting at age 9

A priest accused of years of sexual abuse of a young girl at St. Mary's Parish in Norton in the 1960s and 1970s spent the next 28 years working in Catholic missionary parishes in South America until he was forced into retirement several weeks ago.

Father Donald Bowen, who served at St. Mary's from 1965 to 1973, allegedly began abusing the girl when she was 9 years old and continued until she was in high school, according to the victim, who contacted The Sun Chronicle but asked not to be publicly identified.

The victim, now in her 40s, said she recently reported Bowen to the Bristol County district attorney's office. The Fall River Diocese reached a settlement with the victim in 1992, paying her an undisclosed amount of money and requiring her to keep silent about the matter. The settlement does not prevent her from reporting the crimes to prosecutors.

A spokesman for District Attorney Paul Walsh Jr. declined to comment, but The Sun Chronicle has learned that Bowen is one of 25 priests in the Fall River Diocese that Walsh's office is investigating.

A spokesman for the diocese said he is not aware of any allegations by other individuals against Bowen, either locally or in South America.

The victim said she was prompted to come forward by news accounts of the sexual abuse scandal in the Archdiocese of Boston. She said she wanted to both urge the church to prevent such crimes in the future and to make people aware of the impact of abuse on victims.

"Hopefully if enough people read about this horrific ongoing problem, the public will band together and force those in power to put a real true stop to this," she said.

"I want to do anything and everything I can to prevent this type of experience from happening to another child," she said. "The aftereffects are horrendous.... Had I been protected from this pedophile I know my life would have turned out very differently than it has."

The victim said she had spent years in therapy to deal with various physical, psychological and emotional problems, including anorexia and suicidal tendencies, and difficulties with relationships, intimacy and trust. She now considers those problems behind her.

She even became a quiet activist, and organized a couple of retreats for victims of abuse. "Victims can recover and even thrive," she said. "I count myself as one of them."

Missionary work

In 1973, Bowen went to South America under the auspices of the Boston-based Society of St. James the Apostle, but like others in the missionary program he officially remained a diocesan priest. The society's volunteer priests are loaned by their bishops to churches in Bolivia, Peru and Ecuador.

Bowen continued to work in South America until he was removed earlier this year, long after diocesan leaders were made aware of the allegations against him.

Beginning in the late 1980s, the victim, either personally or through her lawyer, communicated with church officials about the alleged abuse.

Those contacted included Cardinal Bernard Law of Boston; the St. James Society; Archbishop Daniel Cronin, who was bishop in Fall River at the time and is now archbishop in Hartford; Bishop Sean O'Malley, who came to Fall River in August 1992, and priests involved in processing an annulment of her first marriage in the late 1980s. She said she also talked to individual priests about the abuse at different points in her life.

After being contacted by the victim's lawyer in 1990, the Diocese of Fall River offered the monetary settlement, which she agreed to and signed in 1992. That was after Bishop Cronin had left
and before Bishop O’Malley arrived.

According to diocesan spokesman John Kearns, when Bishop O’Malley became aware of the allegations, he told the St. James Society that Bowen was to receive ongoing therapy and have no unsupervised access to children. Kearns said that while working for the society, Bowen was under its supervision and directly responsible to his superiors there.

‘Our little secret’

Bowen had been ordained for a year when he was assigned as an associate priest at St. Mary’s in 1965. He became a friend of the victim’s family, was a frequent guest in their home, and often took the children out to run errands, get ice cream, go to a fast-food restaurant or stop by the parish center.

One night, he stepped over the line, she said.

She was 9 years old the night she was at the home of a relative, sitting in the living room with Bowen and a cousin. The adults had gone to bed, she said, and her cousin had fallen asleep when Bowen grabbed her, pulled her on top of him, and began fondling and kissing her.

The next day, she said, he acted as though nothing had happened.

“I didn’t say a word,” she said. “I didn’t know if it was right or wrong.”

Little by little, more and more happened in various locations, she said, including her house and those of relatives, the parish center, the choir loft, and Bowen’s car.

At the time, she didn’t understand the sexual acts, she said, and thought they were part of being the priest’s friend.

“Whatever he told me to do, I did it,” she said.

The priest made her feel special for being singled out, she said, and he began telling her he loved her.

“He said it was our little secret, that no one should know,” the victim said. She didn’t tell anyone for years, she said, because she thought no one would believe her.

“I never went to anyone because it would have been a miracle for anyone to believe me,” she said. “Everyone adored this guy. Who would they believe — a priest who was highly regarded, or a little girl?”

When she reached high school age, she said she tried to stop the abuse and resisted his efforts to be alone with her. She also began confiding in friends, and believes that word got back to her family and to Bowen. Soon after that, she heard he was going to South America.

Bowen left St. Mary’s in 1973 and spent a couple of months at St. John the Evangelist Parish in Attleboro before going to South America in the fall of that year, according to Kearns.

Bowen remained there but periodically returned to this country for visits, according to the victim. During one of them, she said she confronted him about the abuse, and he told her he loved her and wanted to leave the priesthood to marry her.

For years, he sent her love notes and cards, she said, and continued to send her letters from South America.

Removed from ministry

Bowen was most recently serving at a church in Oruro, Bolivia. As of earlier this year he was no longer with the St. James Society, according to the Rev. Joseph Shields, director of the society.

Shields said Bowen left based on Cardinal Law’s “zero tolerance” policy that calls for removal of priests after a single allegation of abuse. He said Bowen’s case had been brought to his attention, but would not elaborate on how that occurred.

Shields declined to answer other questions about the priest because of his concern over legal issues involved in the case.

Bowen is now retired and living on his own in Bolivia, according to Kearns, the diocesan spokesman.

Attempts by The Sun Chronicle to contact Bowen through the diocese and through the St. James Society were unsuccessful, as were attempts to reach him by telephone in Bolivia.

A police captain in Oruro who was reached by phone told The Sun Chronicle that he had no information on anyone named Donald Bowen in his files.

As of late February, Bowen was still listed on the St. James Society’s Web site as being in Oruro, one of four priests there and one of a dozen in Bolivia.

By late March, Bowen’s name and photograph had been removed from the Web site.

At the time Bowen was sent to South America in 1973, the Fall River Diocese was overseen by
Bishop Cronin, who is now in Hartford. When contacted by The Sun Chronicle for comment, the Rev. John Gatzak, spokesman for the Archdiocese of Hartford, referred all inquiries about Bowen to Kearns of the Fall River Diocese.

Kearns said Bowen requested on his own to join the St. James Society in 1973, a time when dioceses had an ample number of priests and were able to release some from diocesan duty so they could do mission work.

Under canon law of the church, Kearns said, these priests remain a part of the diocese where they were ordained, but come under the supervision of the St. James director when they join the society.

Gathering strength

The victim said she went through years of therapy after Bowen left, and gradually became strong enough to talk about the abuse. She said she told her story to a couple of priests over the years in the hope that something would be done about Bowen, but nothing happened.

In the late 1980s, she applied to the Fall River Diocese for an annulment of her first marriage as a way of bringing the allegations to the attention of the church.

She attributed her marital difficulties to the abuse by Bowen. As part of her testimony to obtain the annulment, she said she had to provide graphic details of the abuse. Yet Bowen stayed in South America, and she said she got a fast annulment at no expense to her. "I didn’t even pay for a postage stamp," she said.

According to Kearns, any information that is part of an annulment process is strictly confidential, and would not be shared with anyone outside that process.

The victim later went to a lawyer, who sent letters in 1990 to Cardinal Law, Bishop Cronin and Monsignor John Moriarty of the St. James Society, claiming that her client had suffered severe personal injuries as a result of "the negligence and improper conduct of Father Donald Bowen."

The lawyer ended up dealing with the attorney for the Diocese of Fall River and sent him a subsequent and lengthy letter describing the abuse in detail, and the psychological, sexual and emotional damage the victim said she suffered because of it.

The victim said she asked at the time of the settlement that Bowen get treatment and not have contact with children. The diocese would not put that in writing, she said, but said it would suggest to the St. James Society that the priest be in therapy and not work with children. She said she was also told she could call and check on his whereabouts at any time.

The victim said she never got any proof that Bowen went into treatment, and was continually concerned that he might be abusing more children in the mountains and villages of South America.

"To say he had no access to children is a joke," the victim said.

Just before Porter

The settlement was reached in 1992 just weeks before the victims of former priest James Porter went public with their allegations, which included abuse of dozens of children in the 1960s at St. Mary’s parish in North Attleboro and elsewhere. Porter is now in prison.

Bowen’s victim said she was surprised by the revelations and had never thought that so many others had been abused by a priest.

The victim said she remained concerned about Bowen and called the St. James Society in 1994 to ask about his whereabouts.

The society, she said, would not give her any information, and she then contacted Bishop O’Malley, and asked to meet with him. She said the bishop listened to her story and told her he was not familiar with the case, but would look into it.

She received a letter from the bishop in September 1994 that said Bowen was still affiliated with the St. James Society in Oruro, Bolivia.

"I have taken every step possible to insure that past problems will not be repeated," Bishop O’Malley said in his letter. "He and his superiors have been advised that he is to have no unsupervised access to children. He has been directed to receive ongoing therapy. If these directives are not workable for him, or the Society of Saint James the Apostle, he is to return home and retire from active ministry."

Kearns, the diocesan spokesman, said that when Bishop O’Malley became aware of the allegations against Bowen, he contacted Bowen’s superior at the St. James Society, and was assured that the priest would not be working with children, and that his tasks would only include training adult religion instructors, writing a history of the society, and performing other
administrative tasks, and that he would be supervised.

Besides a director, the society has a coordinator for each of the three countries in South America where parishes are located. In the society’s monthly newsletter in June 2000, Bowen was referred to as the coordinator in Bolivia.

A policy Bishop O’Malley had put in place in 1994 called for the establishment of a review board to investigate allegations and for mandatory reporting to legal authorities if a child was being abused. Since then, the review board has looked at allegations brought to the attention of the diocese by alleged victims who are now adults.

The policy would not have applied to the Bowen case, Kearns said, because it had been settled with the diocese before Bishop O’Malley arrived. But he said the bishop felt strongly enough about the allegations to contact the leadership of the society. Since the Porter case, he said, “nothing is taken lightly or for granted.”

Bishop O’Malley has said that when allegations of past abuse were brought to the diocese following the Porter case, he investigated and then removed several priests from active ministry if the allegations had substance.

Asked why the bishop did not remove Bowen from ministry at that time, Kearns said the priest was directly responsible to his superiors at the St. James Society, and Bishop O’Malley had been assured that Bowen would not work with children.

Widening probe

The diocese and District Attorney Walsh announced last week that they had been exchanging information about old cases for several weeks and that complaints against 25 priests were being investigated. The individuals and their parishes were not identified.

According to a law enforcement source, Bowen is on the list, and one of the issues bearing on all the cases is the statute of limitations.

In the Bowen case, investigators will presumably examine the effect of Bowen’s residency in South America. Under some circumstances, authorities have said, the statute of limitations doesn’t expire if the suspect leaves the jurisdiction in which the crime occurred.

In explaining his sexual abuse policy in the past, Bishop O’Malley has said that no diagnosed pedophile would be assigned in the diocese or be authorized to minister outside the diocese. His spokesman, Kearns, said the diocese does not even wait until a case goes that far, and is now removing accused priests while investigations are conducted.

That was the case with the Rev. Steven Furtado, who was recently removed from Holy Ghost Parish in Attleboro while an allegation against him is investigated. The incident allegedly occurred about 20 years ago.
Eyewitness to war

Former Attleboro rabbi discusses life in a war zone and the hope for peace

JERUSALEM, ISRAEL — Rabbi Gail Diamond was in a car about a block away from the Moment café when a bomb went off there in early March.

"I heard a very loud boom," said Rabbi Diamond, who served at Congregation Agudas Achim in Attleboro for seven years before moving to Israel in December 2000.

The café that was bombed is only a block away from the Conservative Yeshiva, a school where Rabbi Diamond now teaches daily.

"The week after the bombing at the Moment café was really hard, because I go by that location twice every day," Rabbi Diamond said in an e-mail interview this week. Students and faculty from the school went to the site to say Psalms, she said, and now it is adorned with memorial candles and flowers.

The sights and the sounds of warfare are never far from her. She can sometimes hear the fighting in Beit Jala or Bethlehem, or the sirens when bombings occur in her city, or the helicopters bringing officials to the nearby Israeli Parliament for talks.

"Sometimes we hear fighter planes," she said.

It's the kind of living on the edge of violence that Americans can only imagine, even after the horror of Sept. 11, but one that Israelis have lived with for decades.

Jews there and everywhere will bring their fears and their prayers into Passover, which begins at sundown tonight.

Rabbi Diamond said she will approach the holy season with the same mixed feelings she has had ever since arriving in Israel — grateful to be there with her partner, her parents and her brother's family while at the same time missing her friends here.

"I will be sad for the suffering of our Arab cousins in the West Bank and Gaza, whose lives are restricted more than ours, whose economy is even more in shambles, and who face daily hardships much more severe than any I have known," she said.

"I will also feel sad for all those, Jewish and Arab, who have lost loved ones in the current conflict, over 1300 dead since it began, with countless others injured. I will say a prayer of thanks for the emergency workers, the doctors, the soldiers and security guards, and all who put themselves on the line to help others in these difficult times."

"I will be cautious and fearful, as I am every day, about where to shop, where to take my parents on their visit," she said. "I will have one ear open for loud noises, sirens, and the other signs of trouble here. And I will have my heart open for the message of faith that the story of Passover brings. I will pray for and continue to believe in miracles and in God's redemptive power, which is so needed in this time and in this place."

Security is on everyone's mind, she said, but people are also trying to continue with their daily routines.

"Israeli people, especially in Jerusalem, are very strong," Rabbi Diamond said. "They are determined to go on with their lives. At the same time, everyone is fed up with the violence, and everyone is fearful. Everyone has to make choices about where they are willing to go, what risks they are willing to take."

Many people have curtailed their activities, she said, while others are determined that terrorists will not run their lives.

Meanwhile, the economy is suffering because of the drop in tourism and in general activity. People are afraid to go to malls, restaurants and other places, she said.

"There is constant discussion of terrorism and warnings of terrorist attacks in various places,"
she said. "People have a sense of hopelessness, and much of the sense of promise that the peace process fostered is gone," yet they are hoping and praying for peace.

As efforts to broker a truce begin anew today with a summit in Beirut, feelings are mixed about the actions of world leaders, including Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat.

"The Israeli public is deeply divided about Sharon's policies, just as they were deeply divided before he came into office," Rabbi Diamond said.

As an example, she described demonstrations in the city that supported moving all Arabs out of Israel or the territories, while only blocks away, demonstrators were pushing for peace.

As for Arafat, she said, not very many people see him as a credible leader.

"Many Israelis don't believe that Arafat ever wanted peace," she said.

United States intervention is also getting mixed reviews, she said, because efforts in the past have only resulted in more violence. But she said Israelis know that outside diplomatic efforts may help.

She does not criticize the Israeli officers who have refused to serve in the West Bank and Gaza, saying they are making difficult choices based on their conscience. But she said there are those in her country who believe that the officers' refusal to fight has strengthened the Palestinians, who are well aware of the deep divides in public opinion.

She believes that the Palestinians started this intifada in September 2000 because they thought they could achieve more with violence than at the negotiating table.

"I do not want this country to show them that their calculation is correct," she said.

"I have come to believe that Israel is in a fight for survival as serious as we have ever been in, against an armed enemy who wants our destruction," Rabbi Diamond said. "Within that context, we need to figure out how to protect the security of our citizens and the morality of our society. I hope that will one day mean the end of the occupation and the dismantling of some settlements, but that can only happen in a context of security and a genuine desire for peace from the other side."

As for American Jews who oppose the occupation and the policies of Sharon, Rabbi Diamond respects their right to form their own opinions, but she hopes they are speaking from an informed and balanced position.

"I have never supported settlement in the West Bank and Gaza, I did not vote for Sharon, and would not if he were to run again any time in the future," Rabbi Diamond said. "However, in the 14 months since I have been here, I have learned more than anything how much I do not know. I don't believe that people who are not here can truly understand all that is going on. I live here and I still do not understand."

She encourages Americans to study the map of Israel so they will understand the geographic and demographic challenges for both sides. People should realize, she said, that the West Bank is not an appendage to Israel as some people believe, but that it is actually the center of the country, and that Israel has many borders that are difficult to defend.

Americans should also read books and be informed, she said, and not just rely on television sound bites.

She also hopes they will visit Israel.

"Talk to Israelis and Palestinians," Rabbi Diamond advised. "See for yourself the country that is holy to the three great monotheistic religions. Find out for yourself what this place is about."

Her hopes for the future, she said, are summed up in the closing words of Psalm 122.

"Pray for the peace of Jerusalem, and let all who love her be consoled. Great solace be upon your force, salvation's rest amid your hills. For all my kind, for all my friends, may I now speak, Shalom to you, and for the house of the Lord, our God, I only seek your good."
ATTLEBORO — The Wednesday night services at Bethany Village Fellowship are as welcoming and accommodating as a church can be.

Worshipers arrive with walkers, in wheelchairs, on the arm of their caretakers, or on their own. Once there, they can be themselves, and they can be as much a part of the service as they want to be, despite their mental or physical handicaps.

Just ask Ron Campbell, who greets people as they enter, then leads the opening prayer and the hymns. The first song is always "Everybody Ought to Know Who Jesus Is," because that's his favorite.

"I like this church," Campbell said after a recent service. "That's why I come here." The service is conducted by the Rev. Jewel Everette, an Attleboro resident and pastor of Fruit of the Spirit Mission Church in Pawtucket who is fondly referred to as Pastor Jewel by her flock.

Her special brand of ministry began because of her work for more than 25 years in the mental health field, first at the former Wrentham State School as a recreation supervisor, then for community agencies as a licensed practical nurse. That gave her a chance to grow with the population she served, and to know their needs, she said.

"I realized the key thing missing from their lives was the ability to go to church" Rev. Everette said.

They could certainly attend any church, but because of their disabilities, they might be noisy or speak out during the service, she said, and that might not sit well with traditional church-goers who expect their worship space to be quiet and structured.

So in 1999, Rev. Everette approached the Rev. Dan Dore of Bethany Church in South Attleboro, whom she has known for years and who has handicapped children himself. She told him of her hope to offer services for people with mental disabilities, and Rev. Dore opened the doors of the church to her.

A sanctuary area was set up in the lower level of the church, which is easily accessible from the parking lot and is close to the rest rooms for the convenience of worshipers.

Rev. Everette then spread the word through the mental health community that services would be held every other Wednesday at Bethany. The response was so positive that the services were soon being held weekly.

It was a natural kind of ministry for the Pentecostal pastor who grew up as the oldest of 13 children and who readily acknowledges that she was meant to be a caretaker. She worked for years at a church in Boston, where she presided over the missionary department that took care of such ministry as feeding the hungry and visiting the sick.

Now at Bethany on Wednesday nights, her approach has always been to make the worshipers a part of everything she does. So she recruited them to greet others at the door, be on the praise and worship team to lead the singing and the praying and to assist with communion, and help set up the coffee and cookies for the fellowship following the service.

"All I do is give the Word" Rev. Everette said, and the rest comes from the people themselves.

They come to the service from all walks of life and with all kinds of disabilities. They live at home, in group homes, or in shared living situations. They come faithfully every week, and get upset when they can't get there.

Seeing that kind of devotion energizes their pastor.

"They renew my faith every week" Rev. Everette said. "I can't wait for Wednesday night."

The service is scheduled for 6 p.m. but only starts 15 or 20 minutes later to allow everyone plenty of time to get there, get in, and get settled. They sit around small tables, or on chairs facing the front of the worship area. Some weeks, about 20 people show up. Other weeks, there's 30 or more who come from as close as Attleboro, or as far as Norfolk and Sharon, or from Cranston, R.I. as Mike Amaral does.

"I like it because she is a wonderful person," Amaral said of Pastor Jewel.
“She helps us out,” he said. “This is the best church I’ve been at.”

Some of the worshipers are people Rev. Everette knew at the former Wrentham State School, and others are people she works with on her current job with May Institute in Attleboro. Some she never met before, but now, all of them are friends, and she greets each one as they enter.

“Hi, Rose. How are you doing?” she said to one of them before a recent service. “You’ve got new earrings and a new dress. My goodness.”

After guiding Rose to a seat, she met someone else at the door while the worship team got everyone praying, singing and clapping to songs like “Shout to the Lord” and “Joy, Joy, Joy, Down in My Heart.”

Jeanne Dore of the worship team often gives the reading, and leads the singing, which Rev. Everette said comes right from the heart.

“I love this church so much,” Dore said later.

No one cares if anyone joining in is a bit off-key, or if the music doesn’t sound exactly as it could. Everyone sings from the soul, and some even move to the beat.

Talking and walking about may disturb other services, but not this one. People feel free to go over and chat with a friend for awhile while the singing continues.

“At our service, it’s accepted” Rev. Everette said.

If they want to be part of the choir, they don’t even have to ask, she said. They just join the group. If they have something to say, they say it. If they have a problem, they let others know.

The best part of these worshipers, she said, is that they are who they seem to be, and they say what they think. Unlike the rest of the population, the mentally handicapped don’t hide their thoughts or their feelings.

“What they say is what they mean,” she said. “That’s powerful.”

She does the same in her sermon.

“It’s important to know God loves us,” she told the congregation. “It’s important to know he cares for us.”

Acknowledging that everyone goes through a lot on their daily journey, Rev. Everette reminded them that in everything they do, they should give thanks.

“I encourage you to not look at life half empty,” she told them. “Always look at it as getting filled up.”

“Take time to smile at someone having a hard day. Do random acts of kindness. Let them know someone is feeling their pain. God knows about our pain, our struggles.”

Getting them to understand the gospel would seem like a challenging task, but Rev. Everette said judging by the sincerity of their reactions, that doesn’t seem to be the case.

“They have given us a love for God far greater than most people understand,” she said. “In their simple way, they make the message of the gospel very plain.”

They in fact are so faithful that they amaze her with their fervor.

“Rain, snow, sleet, they are there,” she said. “You know you’re doing something right when they keep coming back.”

Two years ago, Rev. Everette decided to expand her ministry to also offer Sunday services, and found a vacant storefront on Broadway in Pawtucket that could be turned into worship space. Soon it did, with the help of donated chairs, sound equipment and an organ. Now services held there at Fruit of the Spirit Mission Church are for everyone, Rev. Everette said, just as the Wednesday night services at Bethany are open to all.

“It’s one church for anybody who wants to come,” she said. “Those who love God are welcome. Those who have a heart for God are welcome.”
Opening doors and minds
Gay people finding welcome at many churches

When their former pastor got married in Connecticut recently, the Rev. Pat Potter and the Rev. Brenda Moulton danced together at the reception.

That was a significant step for two women who are not only practicing ministers, but who have also been lesbian partners for more than 20 years.

So at the wedding of the Rev. Karen DeWerth, their former pastor at Immanuel Lutheran Church in Attleboro, they asked the bride if it would be acceptable for them to dance. Rev. DeWerth told them to be themselves.

But what made dancing even more acceptable was the fact that the congregation at Immanuel had proclaimed months before, under Rev. DeWerth’s leadership, that gays and lesbians are welcomed there and are encouraged to share in the life of the church.

That “Affirmation of Welcome” not only made the two women more comfortable in their own church community, but also made them comfortable enough to dance publicly at a reception where other members of Immanuel were present.

Rev. Potter, the minister of music and associate minister at Immanuel, said the congregation’s vote in January following a year of study and discussion was in fact an official public welcome.

“I know God fully loves me and accepts me. I know now that my congregation does, too,” she said. “It’s incredible. You cannot understand how deeply this affects me and my partner. Brenda is here, singing in the choir. We are here as a couple.”

Rev. Moulton, an American Baptist minister and coordinator of the national Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists, said people sometimes wonder why churches need to make this kind of declaration rather than simply and quietly accepting homosexuals in their midst. But she said it makes a big difference to gays and lesbians who may have been part of the church community for years yet still were never sure how others perceived them.

Once a declaration is made, she said, “You don’t have to sit and wonder how people will see you.”

Immanuel is now one of more than 250 Lutheran congregations in the United States and Canada to be part of the Reconciling in Christ program of Lutherans Concerned, an organization independent of the Lutheran denomination but one that recognizes welcoming congregations.

These congregations are part of a growing national movement among some Protestant denominations to not only welcome gays and lesbians, but to ordain them, recognize their partnerships, and baptize their children.

Immanuel is the first church in The Sun Chronicle area to take the bold step of becoming a welcoming church, a move that led Rev. DeWerth to later baptize the baby of a lesbian couple in the congregation.

But at least one other local church is considering a similar move.

At Murray Unitarian Universalist Church in Attleboro, a task force began a study process last spring that will likely lead to a vote by the membership either in the spring or the fall on declaring Murray as a welcoming congregation to gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people.

In the Unitarian Universalist denomination that is based on belief in the worth and dignity of every human being, welcoming congregations are the norm, but a preparation process is encouraged.

Murray’s minister, the Rev. Sandra Fitz-Henry, said although members consider themselves to be very liberal and open, they come from a diverse religious background and hold a range of views and attitudes about homosexuality that need to be examined before a vote is taken. The study process, she said, also provides an opportunity to study the biblical passages that are often used as a basis for discrimination.

“People in this church especially need to become familiar with the texts as they try to
understand other points of view," Rev. Fitz-Henry said. "There is so much emotional energy about this issue. It's incumbent on us to learn where that emotional energy comes from."

Diane Beauvais, co-chair of the task force at Murray, said she got involved in the process because despite all the talk that everyone is created equal, people often don't really mean what they say.

"I thought it was important to get behind the words and to take action," she said.

She believes that declaring the congregation as a welcoming one is important.

"For gays and lesbians, it's a challenge to take a step through the door of any church," she said.

Rev. Moulton said most gays and lesbians don't go to church because they feel rejected, and often see themselves as having to choose between their sexuality and their spirituality. Being condemned by others and believing that they are condemned by God has led many homosexuals to suicide, she said.

"There is nothing you can do to become the person you think God wants you to be," she said.

To those who say that homosexuals could change, she says, "No matter how much you pray and ask God to change you, you will not change who you are. I believe that sexual orientation is part of God's creation."

Tony Bolyn of Immanuel Lutheran Church and a member of the welcoming task force there said he believes no church has the right to deny anyone of faith the ability to be in communion with Christ.

"I really feel that all persons should be welcomed in fellowship with Christ," he said. "Let God figure it all out afterwards."

While the step that Immanuel took may seem like a monumental move for a mainline Protestant church, Bolyn said the process and the vote were done with little or no dissension or resistance, and no fanfare.

"It was kind of an ordinary thing with us," he said. "We made no headlines about it."

Part of the acceptance was due to Rev. Potter, who was ministering at Immanuel long before the congregation decided to be a welcoming church. Her sexual orientation was known to some in the church, including her pastor, Rev. DeWerth. Because she was ordained in the United Church of Christ, Rev. Potter's sexual orientation was not an issue for ordination, yet she can serve at a Lutheran church because of an agreement between the two denominations.

The United Church of Christ, the denomination of most of the congregational churches in the state, also has a provision for local churches to declare themselves as open and affirming to gays and lesbians, a step that UCC churches in the Attleboro area have not yet taken.

Whether or not they do, local UCC churches can choose to hire a gay or lesbian minister, and pastors can perform ceremonies of union for gay couples, and baptize their children, but would usually do so only with the support of the congregation.

The Rev. Paul Nickerson, associate minister of the UCC Massachusetts Conference and a member of its open and affirming task force, said about 10 percent of the 430 UCC churches in this state have become open and affirming. The denomination encourages each one to first do a lengthy study involving discussion, thought and prayer, he said, and an examination of scriptural passages that seem to condemn homosexual practice. Part of the discussion, he said, is whether these passages speak of faith and should be taken literally, or whether they speak of the mores and homophobia of the day.

Local UCC churches end up at a variety of places on these issues, he said, and if the result of the study shows that people are very divided, the congregation may be better off not taking a vote.

The Rev. Ann Day of Worcester, a UCC minister and coordinator for open and affirming programs in the state conference, said more and more churches have become open since the denomination adopted a national policy in 1985.

"It's a steadily growing movement in the UCC," she said. "That is very encouraging."

One reason, she said, is the growing acceptance in society, and the increase in the number of gays and lesbians who are coming to churches in search of a spiritual home. The general understanding among open and affirming congregations, she said, is that sexual orientation covers a wide spectrum and is a gift from God regardless of where it falls on that spectrum. Yet the goal is not to condone promiscuity, she said, but to promote committed relationships.

"All Christians need to live out their sexuality in ways that are loving and responsible," Rev. Day said. To her, an enriching and loving relationship between two consenting adults is an ethical relationship in the sight of God.

According to the Rev. Dale Hempen, associate conference minister for the southeast area of the
Mass. Conference of UCC, the churches that have voted to be open and affirming in this part of the
state are mostly in the South Shore and on Cape Cod.

The process works best when the suggestion comes from the congregation rather than the
pastor, Rev. Hempen said, and he is seeing the issue being raised more and more by parents or
aunts and uncles of gays and lesbians who want them to feel welcomed.

While some may say that a public statement is not necessary and that gays can simply attend
services without making their sexual orientation known, Rev. Hempen said the "don't ask, don't
tell" policy doesn't work in churches.

"It makes us feel more comfortable, but not gays and lesbians," he said.

The Rev. Ross Putnam, pastor of Second Congregational Church in Attleboro, said he feels
strongly about affirmation, but respects the diversity of his congregation and would prefer to have
a church member raise the issue.

When he has brought it up hypothetically to the board of elders in the past, he had the sense that
some would welcome the action, while others who are more conservative would oppose it.

No one in his church has yet pushed for an open and affirming declaration, he said. Meanwhile,
if he were ever asked to perform a ceremony of union for a same-sex couple, he would go to the
board of elders first.

The Rev. Carole Baker of Central Congregational Church in North Attleboro said she would do
the same.

"I would not do it without the knowledge of the board of deacons and the whole church," she
said, and that would likely mean a lengthy study process before a decision was made on becoming
open and affirming.

Other mainline Protestant denominations have been struggling over the issue, and in some cases
the differences have raised speculation over possible splits.

For the most part, denominations have officially declared that homosexual practice is
incompatible with the Bible and with Christian teaching, but individual synods, dioceses and
conferences have taken a more liberal view.

Leaders of the worldwide Anglican church, for instance, declared in 1998 that homosexuality was
incompatible with Scripture, and that same-sex unions and the ordination of gays should not be
allowed. But that position is not binding, and a more liberal stance has been taken by some
dioceses in this country, including the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts.

Kenneth Arnold, director of communications for the diocese, said a lot of freedom exists at the
diocesan and parish level, and local parishes and their priests can make decisions on inclusiveness.
About 20 parishes in the diocese have chosen to do so, he said.

Priests can also choose to bless a same-sex union, he said, but would usually consider the
sentiment of the parish before doing so. Baptism, he said, is open to everyone, regardless of the
sexual orientation of the parents, and sexual orientation is not a factor for ordination.

The Rev. Maryalice Sullivan, rector of Grace Episcopal Church in North Attleboro, said her
parish has not taken a formal stance, but part of her teaching is that everyone is created in God’s
image.

Divisions exist even among American Baptists, a denomination that adopted a resolution against
homosexual practice 10 years ago but that leaves local churches to make their own decisions.

The Rev. John Fisk, pastor of First Baptist Church in Attleboro, said his church welcomes
everyone, regardless of race, nationality, economic status, theological persuasion, age, sex or
sexual orientation, and has put that belief into practice for years.

"We believe that God’s kingdom is filled with diversity and want our church to reflect that
diversity also," Rev. Fisk said. “We have strongly opposed those in our denomination who would
discriminate against gays and lesbians by excluding welcoming and affirming churches from the
denomination. We advocate for a “live and let live” attitude amongst American Baptist churches
where there are differences of opinions about homosexuality.”

Various other branches of Baptists hold a range of mostly conservative views, while the
Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists that Rev. Moulton heads consists of welcoming
churches, organizations and individuals.

In the United Methodist denomination, the official teaching opposes homosexual practice and
ordination as well as same-sex unions, but a growing independent Methodist group called
Reconciling Ministries Network is working for inclusiveness and is part of a larger ecumenical
“welcoming church” movement.

More conservative denominations have made it clear that homosexual practice is not acceptable
and is in fact sinful.

The official position of the worldwide Assemblies of God, for instance, is that the growing acceptance of homosexual identity and behavior is part of a spiritual disorder threatening the family, the government and the church. It holds that the Bible identifies homosexual behavior as sinful, that no scientific evidence exists proving homosexuality is genetically based, and that homosexuals can be treated and can change with the help of counselors, pastors and faith.

That view is shared by other conservative Christians, and is nearly opposite the stand of more liberal ones.

The New England Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, which Immanuel is part of, is one of 22 Reconciling in Christ synods in the denomination, and its bishop, the Rev. Margaret Payne, has compared the current struggle of gays and lesbians to the civil rights struggle decades ago.

"It is a time when we, as a society and as a church, need to pay special attention to those who are being scorned or rejected," Bishop Payne said in a letter to Rev. DeWerth earlier this year to commend her for her leadership through the affirmation process at Immanuel.

Still, the ELCA will not ordain gays and lesbians unless they are celibate, a stand that is currently being studied.

The Rev. Clifford Gerber of Shrewsbury, who chairs the gay and lesbian task force for the New England Synod of the ELCA and who is pastor at an open church, said clergy are not allowed to be involved in sexual relationships outside of marriage, and because gays and lesbians cannot marry, they cannot be in ministry unless they are celibate. But he said the ELCA is currently studying issues of sexuality, including ordination, and blessings for same-sex unions. A report is expected next year, he said, and a decision by 2005.

The movement toward accepting gays and lesbians is slowly making progress, he said, but is not being helped by the current sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic church that some conservatives try to blame on homosexuals.

"Studies show that children are more in danger of heterosexual molestation than homosexual molestation," he said.

Another issue is that gay marriage is seen as a threat to society, a view he said is based on the assumption that sexual orientation is a choice.

"It is clear to me that it is not a matter of choice," Rev. Gerber said. "I have met too many people who have struggled not to be homosexual."

Regardless of what position churches take, they will likely lose members over this issue, he said.

"It's a lose-lose situation. No matter what we do, we will lose people. We have to do what is right, and let the chips fall where they may."

For people like Rev. Potter and Rev. Moulton, a welcoming statement means they can be who they are, and others can acknowledge their relationship. When they recently celebrated their 20th anniversary of being together, they paid for the altar flowers that week, and a notice appeared in the church bulletin. People congratulated them, just as they would any other couple.

The acceptance is particularly gratifying for two ministers whose life and work are tied into the church, Rev. Potter said.

While some may use theology to condemn homosexuality, her theology is that God loves everyone.

"God is so much bigger than all of our divisions," she said.