

Chaplains offers support

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

LA CROSSE, Wis. — Police who say they want to reach out to victims of violent crime but don't always have the resources are growing increasingly reliant on police chaplains to fill that void.

Police chaplains offer support to tragedy victims and their families, and the goal is to do it with religious neutrality, said Police Chief Ed Kondracki of the La Crosse Police Department.

"They're there to provide physical and emotional support to the victims of trauma, period," he said. "And they provide that service regardless of your faith, or lack of faith."

Bill Noffke credited an Onalaska chaplain for helping his family through the April 30 disappearance of his 21-year-old son, Levi, in a marsh. After two days of searching, authorities called in a police chaplain to help tell Noffke's family that crews were shifting their focus from searching for a live man to dragging

for a body.

Rev. Tim Duesenberg, a pastor at Christ the King Lutheran Church in Onalaska, responded, supporting the family and relaying information about recovery efforts.

"When they found our son, Levi, we formed a circle of family and friends and the chaplain, and held hands and the chaplain said a prayer for him," Bill Noffke said. "It was comforting, a little spirit-lifting."

The La Crosse Police Department began its police chaplain program in 2001 and expanded it to include the Onalaska Police Department the following year.

The chaplains volunteer their time, and intentionally steer away from religious distinctions.

Rev. Mark Clements, head chaplain for the La Crosse and Onalaska police departments, said the purpose is to provide people physical and emotional support during their times of crisis, irrespective of religion.

"I've had them say, 'I don't believe in God.' That's fine, because I'm not here to talk you into God, I'm here to help you," he said.

Kondracki said police deal with people who are dying or who are victimized by crime and abuse, and there's a growing demand for support and outreach.

"(The chaplains) are really helping us meet that increasing demand at no additional cost to the taxpayers or to the department," he said.

Police chaplains respond to emergency situations about every third day across La Crosse County, Clements said. He said prospective chaplains go through strenuous training to make sure they can handle the program's rigors.

"It is a huge shock to go from pulpit ministries to jump in a police car and ride around from 11 p.m. until 3 or 4 in the morning and find out what goes on in this city, in the dark alleys and behind closed doors," he said.

Ministers fighting child abuse

Continued from page 6B

Roman Catholic Church in the 1990s, said the Rev. Kibbie Ruth, of the California-based Kyros Ministry.

Ruth has spent two decades offering training on child abuse, sexual harassment and domestic violence through Kyros to pastors of Lutheran, Episcopal and other denominations nationwide.

"I wish I could tell you it's important because they're suddenly valuing children more," Ruth said. "But it's mainly driven by insurance."

Insurers can face enormous expenses in negligence lawsuits against churches. Some Catholic dioceses have been paying settlements in the tens of millions of dollars in recent years—and insurance companies in many cases are responsible for covering part of that amount.

GuideOne and Church Mutual, the nation's two leading church insurers, now publish educational pamphlets on preventing abuse. Episcopal and Methodist leaders have developed their own training programs.

But not everyone supports this approach. Kimberly Hart, executive director of the National Child Abuse Defense and Resource Center, worries ministers will feel compelled to notify authorities simply to gain immunity from a lawsuit. Her Ohio-based center hosts an annual conference training defense lawyers on combating false child abuse claims.

"People will make the call, just to give them the cloak of protection," Hart said. "What we see is an overreaction to report everything and let somebody else ferret it out."

In Virginia, accusers can contact authorities

anonymously and are required to have a reasonable suspicion, not any specific evidence.

But the Rev. Kendra Grimes-Swager works to ensure that Virginia clergy are as close to being experts on child abuse as possible. The United Methodist Family Services trainer offers straightforward advice—such as avoiding hugs and telling congregants up front that anything revealed in a counseling session could be reported.

Grimes-Swager must also quell the fears of clergy worried about being revealed as tipsters. The Harrisonburg group chattered anxiously as the Rev. Jim Harris told his own story of uncovering abuse—one that ended with the accused father ransacking his office.

"My family felt threatened, if he would tear apart my office, he would come to the parsonage," said Harris, a minister at a church in nearby Augusta County.

Perhaps most troubling to clergy is the specter of violating the bond with congregants, who often share everything from medical conditions to marital troubles.

Some resent becoming ersatz social workers, Ruth said, especially concerning an issue they believe "doesn't happen here." Others fear congregants will clam up.

"I think it will make people more close-mouthed," said Hoskins, pastor at a church in Dayton, outside Harrisonburg. "Then problems won't get addressed at all."

On the Net:

United Methodist Church: www.umc.org

National Child Abuse Defense and Resource Center: www.falseallegation.org

American religious groups are troubled over gay rights issues

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

The increasingly stark polarization of religious groups about homosexuality is seen in new alliances that favor and oppose amending the U.S. Constitution to bar same-sex marriage.

The pro-amendment Religious Coalition for Marriage unites leaders from the Roman Catholic Church, Southern Baptist Convention, evangelical Protestantism (including blacks and Hispanics, Episcopal conservatives, Charles Colson, James Dobson, Rick Warren), Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, Eastern Orthodox, Mormonism and Orthodox Judaism.

The anti-amendment Clergy for Fairness draws support from the Episcopal Church majority, United Church of Christ, Unitari-

an Universalist Association, liberal Judaism and the largely gay Metropolitan Community Churches, among others.

Joining neither alliance: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), United Methodist Church, black Baptist and Methodist denominations, and Muslim groups.

Meanwhile, June show-down meetings of the Episcopal Church and Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) will confront severe splits caused by internal gay policies.

The biblical debate is crucial. Lutheran Frederick Gaiser wrote in the Christian Century magazine that Old Testament prophets shifted to embrace non-Jews and the New Testament abrogated purity laws, therefore, likewise

with homosexuality, Christianity should consider calling "previous words of God into question."

In response, Southern Baptist R. Albert Mohler Jr. said liberals now say "the church must grow beyond Scripture" because their claims that the Bible was misunderstood for 20 centuries lack credibility.

Recent liberal writings include:

- "What God Has Joined Together?: A Christian Case for Gay Marriage" (HarperSanFrancisco) by David Myers and Letha Scanzoni

- "Jesus, the Bible and Homosexuality" (Westminster John Knox) by theologian Jack Rogers, aimed at Presbyterians.

- "To Set Our Hope on Christ," the Episcopal Church's case for tolerant policies

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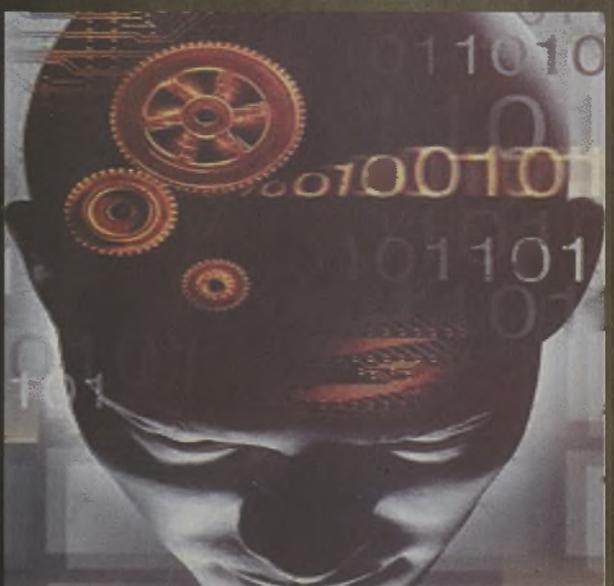
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Woman tosses 3 boys into SF Bay

Continued from page 6B

prosecutors presenting evidence, was held in reverse order so out-of-town witnesses could testify for the defense.

When prosecutors presented their case, they showed part of the video footage of the police interview with Harris immediately after the incident. She sounded groggy, almost drugged and the officers questioned her as if she was a child. Her answers were mumbled, quiet and she seemed confused about where she was and what day it was.

She told the investigators God "said I need to kill my kids," and she took them to the pier for that purpose.

Police officer Thomas Johnson testified that he found Harris at the scene pushing an empty stroller.

"Where did you put the babies?" he asked. Harris replied, "They're OK. They're with their father," Johnson said.

"Did you put the babies into the bay?" Johnson said. "To that question, Miss Harris shook her head up and down and said, 'Yes.'"