

MINISTER SOOTHES TROUBLED CONGREGATIONS

She works to prevent sexual abuse and other problems

By Emily Fancher, STAFF WRITER

Wednesday, February 11, 2004 - SAN MATEO -- For many years, the Rev. Kibbie Ruth has been shining a light into the dark closets of church congregations -- and sometimes what she finds there isn't pretty.

Her cases range from a pastor at a Redwood City congregation who had affairs with dozens of female parishioners to a Fresno deacon who had molested a 3-year-old and scores of other children. There was the female minister at a Methodist church in Carmel who had hidden from the congregation that her husband was a registered sex offender. There was the "hug cruiser," a parishioner who refused to stop giving hugs until the church had to have a restraining order issued against him.

These are just some of the cases on which Ruth has worked as the founding executive director of Kyros Ministries, a nondenominational nonprofit agency that provides training, consultations and crisis intervention for child abuse, clergy sexual misconduct, sexual harassment, sexual addiction and other problems.

Be they Roman Catholic, Protestant, Jewish or Buddhist, congregations from the Bay Area to Nevada, Texas, Kentucky and New York have turned to Kyros. Sometimes it's after a disaster with screaming headlines and an explosive scandal. Sometimes insurance companies pressure church leaders to take preventive steps.

Delicate work Part teacher, therapist, and spiritual adviser with a dash of detective, Ruth works out of the attic office at the Congregational Church of San Mateo. She must delicately investigate what has occurred, protect the victim, create new preventive policies and sometimes take the heat for church leaders by telling the news to the congregation. Then the spiritual and emotional healing can begin.

"Kibbie incorporates having a passion to do the right thing and the technical ability to know what to do," said Rabbi Jay Miller, who has taken her seminar for rabbis. "The leadership learns the steps and are empowered about the appropriate way to respond."

With pale blue eyes, a sharp sense of humor and a trace of a Georgia accent, Ruth exudes comfort and strength. She doesn't mince words and believes that "truth-telling" is critical to healing.

Trained as a physicist, she worked in Silicon Valley before going back to school to become a minister in 1975. She joined the Congregational Church of San Mateo in 1977, and after working as a night minister in San Francisco's Tenderloin district and with the mentally ill at the Napa State Hospital, she founded Kyros in 1984.

"I felt I was putting a Band-Aid on people already harmed, and that's when I realized I had to do something about prevention," said Ruth.

Focus on faith community Originally, Kyros worked to prevent child, spousal and elder abuse through churches, schools and nonprofits, but evolved to focus on the faith community.

Ruth said she has a unique ability to work with the faith community because she is a minister, although for some Catholic congregations, she must work over the phone, because "a female minister is persona non grata."

In addition to the problem of being a woman, often she's up against denial and silence about sexual abuse in the church.

"The religious community tends to think, 'Our people don't do that,'" she said.

She said the majority of congregations in this country have no sexual-abuse-prevention policy even though 80 percent of child molesters are connected to a religious organization. Molesters target religious groups because secular groups, like sports teams, the Boy Scouts and Big Brothers/Big Sisters, have strong safeguards to keep out sexual predators.

Ruth's prevention work often means working with seminary students like those at St. Patrick's Seminary in Menlo Park, where she presents annually. She uses videos, workbooks and discussions, and last year she brought in a registered sex offender to talk about his addiction. Ruth stresses that offenders also need to be ministered to, usually in a separate place, to provide safety and justice to victims.

Ruth said that no two cases are alike, and at times she takes on a bishop or pastor, and other times she works with the church leadership.

"One thing is for sure," said Ruth, "my job is never boring."

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