



# LUKENOTES

SAINT LUKE INSTITUTE INC. • 8901 NEW HAMPSHIRE AVENUE • SILVER SPRING MD 20903  
LUKENOTES is a bi-monthly publication of Saint Luke Institute • Tel. (301)445-7970 • [lukenotes@sl.org](mailto:lukenotes@sl.org) • [www.sl.org](http://www.sl.org)

"Icon of St. Luke" - Copyright© 1985 by Monastery Icons

## CASE STUDY

### “Father David” • Boundaries

*Hetty Irmer, LCSW, is a Continuing Care Therapist at St. Luke Institute.*

Fr. David has enjoyed decades of satisfying ministry both in parish work and as a spiritual director. He is well-liked by his current and former parishioners and is often sought out for counseling and spiritual direction. Fr. David's confreres describe him as helpful and caring. He goes out of his way to help vulnerable parishioners and directees, as well as older or ailing members of the community. Sometimes Fr. David spends so much energy caring for others that he neglects his own needs, leaving little time for recreation or adequate rest and self-care. In the last few months, Fr. David has been withdrawing from community events, his hygiene is poor, and his mood and energy are at an all-time low.

Although Fr. David is responsive to others, he tends to be particularly attentive to women whom others describe as "needy." Throughout his priesthood, he has developed close relationships with the women he has met through his ministerial roles as pastor and spiritual director. Recently, a woman in his current parish complained to the pastor that Fr. David had used "inappropriate" language with her and had hugged her without her consent. When this complaint was shared with Fr. David's provincial, who was already concerned about Fr. David's withdrawal from community and symptoms of burnout, he referred Fr. David to Saint Luke Institute (SLI) for an evaluation.

#### **The Impact of Poor Boundaries**

When Fr. David arrived at SLI for evaluation and subsequent treatment, he had little awareness of his poor personal and ministerial boundaries, and of his own emotional needs. While he acknowledged having numerous emotionally intimate relationships with women over the years, some of which had been physical, he was not able to see the exploitative and immoral nature of his behaviors. Simply put, Fr. David was unaware of the inherent power differential in these relationships and of the many ways in which he displayed inappropriate boundaries, both in his ministry and in his community.

While at SLI, Fr. David worked hard in individual therapy and in group therapy to understand how poor boundaries in his family of origin led to his lack of understanding of healthy personal boundaries. Fr. David initially struggled with the realization that his own boundaries had been crossed as a child in a number of different situations. The oldest child of an alcoholic father, he had been neglected by his father and simultaneously became his mother's emotional confidante at a young age. He learned to expect and seek out emotional closeness from women in his life, regardless of whether or not it was appropriate.

As treatment progressed, Fr. David also came to terms with having been sexually abused on three separate occasions as a child and young adult, including one time that involved sexual abuse by a priest. While at SLI, he resisted identifying these events as abuse, but eventually came to this recognition. Fr. David learned how the violation of his boundaries when he was young and vulnerable led to a diminished sense of self. Furthermore, over time he was also able to acknowledge that he had frequently violated the boundaries of needy women out of his own unmet needs for emotional intimacy, acceptance, and a desire for control in ambiguous situations. After many interventions from his therapists, Fr. David realized that he had used his role as a priest to cross the boundaries of others in order to get his needs met.

Fr. David also looked more carefully at his caretaking behaviors and came to understand that his tendency to create relationships where others depended on him came from a fundamental "need to be needed." He learned that what he had considered to be caring behavior was sometimes his way of getting his own emotional needs met by receiving validation or extra attention from others in his community, especially those in leadership. Additionally, by the time Fr. David was ready to return home, he was able to name his numerous relationships with women as exploitative and immoral and he had a clear sense of what he would and would not do in ministry settings.

### **Developing Healthy Boundaries**

First at SLI, and then at home, Fr. David's task was to translate his new knowledge about healthy boundaries into behaviors in his daily life. While he was able to accept his restriction of "no one-on-one ministry with women," Fr. David had a harder time terminating some friendships he had maintained with women with whom he had been inappropriate in the past. He talked with his new therapist about how to establish better boundaries and he initiated ending the relationships where boundaries had been crossed previously. He also talked with his superior and other confreres about his need to limit his involvement with vulnerable or elderly members of the community so that he would not fall into unhealthy caretaking behaviors.

Fr. David will receive support for his new behaviors from his therapist, his Continuing Care support group, and by attending 12-Step meetings each week. When he returns to SLI for Continuing Care over the next five years, he will be expected to discuss his successes and challenges in establishing healthy boundaries with others. While the first few months after residential treatment are critical for establishing healthy new behaviors, the development and maintenance of healthy boundaries is a lifelong task that requires self-awareness, accountability and support. Fr. David is changing habits he developed over a lifetime in order to respect those to whom he ministers and to honor his newfound sense of personal integrity.

***LUKENOTES is a bimonthly publication of Saint Luke Institute. Permission to use these materials must be requested in writing by contacting [Lukenotes@sl.org](mailto:Lukenotes@sl.org).***

Telephone (301) 422-5499 • Fax (301) 422-5519 • [www.sli.org](http://www.sli.org)

Copyright © 2008 Saint Luke Institute, Inc. All rights reserved.