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CHILD PROTECTION

Dear fellow-fools, please bear with me and try to think the unthinkable and imagine the unimaginable, just for a few moments. Imagine that you were sexually attracted towards children. How then would you go about meeting your young victims in situations that would cause them to put their trust in you?

In a workshop I attended recently we were divided into discussion groups and charged with suggesting answers to that very question, no matter how uncomfortable that might make us feel.

We swallowed hard and buckled down to the job. After that it did not take very many minutes before the suggestion was made that we should seek to involve ourselves in children's work of some kind and gain a position of trust, perhaps in a church or a school. The supervision of sports, or arts and drama activities was then mentioned, as was - wait for it - becoming a children's entertainer!

I do not want to upset any of my friends here, really I don't, but it would be utterly naïve of us to say "We are all Christians; it cannot possibly happen here". Already there have been enough well publicised episodes of child abuse committed by persons holding positions of trust in churches that we can no longer be excused for failing to consider the issue.

The numerous distressing reports we have seen oblige us to agree that that which was previously unthinkable must now be given very serious thought indeed. And after only a little consideration we find ourselves obliged to acknowledge that the clowning ministry, especially when it is peripatetic, must appear an attractive one to those persons who would like to take advantage of the trust that is so readily given to us by the children that we meet.

儻 FOOLS FOR CHRIST 儻

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What then can any of us do? Well, it would be good if all of us could begin by admitting the reality of the danger, and agreeing to take some responsibility for protecting one another. As an obvious example, we could all work at avoiding any situation in which a clown is left alone with a child.

My blood still runs cold when I recall an occasion a couple of years ago, when two nubile young girls of about thirteen years of age asked me to apply make-up to them. Hardly had I begun the task when my two fellow-fools – the only other persons in the room - called out cheerily, “Bye-ee. We’ll be back after lunch”. Before I could say a word they were gone!

As it happened there was no comeback from that occasion, but there could so easily have been. Just one mischievous accusation by either of those girls, and I might now be writing this from a prison cell. Moral: let’s all be alert for potentially dangerous situations, and protect one another from even the slightest risk of creating them.

Next, an urgent message to every clown reading this; if you have not already done so, take urgent steps to get yourself certified as cleared to work with children under the new CRB procedure. If the work that you do is voluntary there should be no fee to pay. Ask your church to refer you to the appropriate body that will stand as your prospective “employer” seeking your clearance - in the Anglican Church it is the diocesan office. You will be given a simple form to fill up and return, and this will initiate a search to be made to discover whether you have a criminal record for offences of a sexual nature.

When you have been cleared, you and your “employer” will each be given a certificate to this effect. At present this system is advisory only, intended to provide guidance to prospective employers, but it may not be too long before the possession of a certificate will have become essential for anyone engaged in our type of work.

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The sooner we are all compliant the better. But until then those of us who have obtained our clearances might like to begin stating this fact in our publicity material, and in this way demonstrate our support for the new system.

To protect the good name of Holy Fools as a body it might be good to place an advisory note in our promotional literature and on our website, and thus show the world that we take very seriously the issue of child protection. We might for instance put out a recommendation that anyone who is thinking of employing a clown should always verify, for his or her peace of mind, that the clown has been CRB cleared.

Let me emphasis once again that in raising these concerns I do not seek to be alarmist. I do intend however that Holy Fools should be seen as taking a responsible position in a matter which is of the most serious concern, and in which every one of us, whether we like it or not, is very closely involved.

Derek A. Finch
(aka Mr.Custard)

<http://www.holy-fools.org.uk/>