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Maine State Legislature
Criminal Justice and Public Safety Committee
Attn: Cynthia Fortier
State House Room 436
Augusta, ME 04333

Dear Senator Deschambault, Representative Warren and distinguished members of the Criminal Justice and Safety Committee:

I am writing to express my support of LD 913 "An Act to Protect the Public from Clergy Sexual Abuse".

In Maine as well as numerous other states in this country, it is a crime for a therapist to engage in sexual contact with a patient. The basis for making such behavior criminal is the unique relationship a therapist has with their patient. A relationship built upon a fundamental trust based upon the vulnerable position the patient has with the therapist – one whereby the therapist possesses unique knowledge regarding the patient's struggles, weaknesses, and secrets. This knowledge places the therapist in a position of profound power of the patient. In its essence, it is a relationship built upon the inequity of power. For a therapist to exploit this power in an effort to engage in sexual contact is so egregious and so destructive that most jurisdictions have deemed such behavior to be criminal.

The relationship between a member of the clergy and someone in his/her care is no different. In fact, one can argue that the position between a member of the clergy and someone under his/her

care is an even more unique relationship than that between a therapist and patient. Not only do the same dynamics of power and trust referenced above exist with a member of the clergy, but the added component of authority makes the relationship even more trusting and inequitable than that between a therapist and patient. This authority is demonstrated in two primary dynamics: 1) The clergy is seen by most as one who represents God in some degree or capacity. It is difficult to adequately explain the power such a dynamic automatically gives to a member of clergy over those who are under their care. When one believes that the words and actions of their pastor represent the words and actions of God, it can give the pastor almost unfettered power. This dynamic was tragically illustrated by a friend of mine who was sexually victimized by a pastor when she wrote, *[Pastor] always said that God had chosen me for something special. I guess I really wanted to believe that. Besides, who was I to question a man of God? It wasn't my place. My role was to be submissive.* When one's authority is believed to be sanctioned by God, they are in an incomparable position of power and influence to sexually victimize those who are seeking to follow and obey God; 2) Clergy members are not only seen as those who represent God, but in most faith communities they are also those entrusted to lead thus have the greatest degree of influence upon the membership. This is a critically important dynamic in the sense that most adults who are sexually victimized by clergy are members of the faith community which is under the authority of the perpetrator-clergy. This authority places the clergy member in a position where they have the unique and significant ability to influence the other members such as painting themselves as the unsuspecting "victim" while vilifying the true victim as either "crazy", "the aggressor" or a number of other dehumanizing labels. Sadly, members are much more likely to embrace the narrative of their leader than an individual member who exposes the ugly truth about someone that virtually everyone else loves and admires. As a result, the victim is seen as a trouble-maker and is eventually ostracized and shamed to the point where they either a) "step back into line" and remain silent, b) leave the faith community, or c) are removed from it. It is this reality that prompts most adult victims of clergy abuse to remain silent about their abuse. This silence is fueled by the fact that they end up believing the offending clergy's lie that they are to blame for the sexual contact and live with an indescribable shame, or they are petrified of what will happen if others find out about it. Thus, too many adult victims of clergy abuse spend their lives suffering in silence. Tragically, this silence empowers clergy offenders to continue offending with the confidence that their future victims will also remain silent out of shame or fear.

I don't have time in this letter to go into the deep and lifelong spiritual damage inflicted by such behavior, but I can tell you as one who has spoken to countless adult victims of clergy sexual abuse that the damage is real and oftentimes destroys the individual's ability to have any type of relationship with the God they once worshipped.

Making such behavior criminal will send a strong message to those who are suffering in silence that they are not at fault for the criminal behavior perpetrated against them by their spiritual leader. It will also empower many to step forward and hold clergy offenders accountable for their crimes. Lastly, this law will also do much to educate the people of Maine that the sexual contact between a member of the clergy and someone in his/her care is not merely an "adulterous relationship", but a serious crime.

I am former sexual crimes prosecutor and the current executive director of an international organization that addresses sexual abuse within faith communities. I have spent over twenty

years confronting sexual perpetrators who have gone largely unnoticed for the simple fact that they are clergy and their victims are adults. Passage of LD 913 will be the beginning of the end of ignoring this reprehensible conduct and will open the door for genuine justice for those whose lives have been eviscerated by a wolf in sheep's clothing.

Thank you for receiving this letter and for your consideration of it.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Boz Tchividjian', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Boz Tchividjian
Executive Director, GRACE