

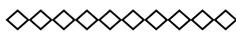
# Church Still Challenged To Deal With Clerical Abuse of Minors

By Beth Griffin



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Teresa Kettelkamp  
Director  
USCCB Office of Child and  
Youth Protection



The church has made significant progress in dealing with clerical sexual abuse of minors, but must continue to be vigilant because healing is a long-term process. Part of the challenge is to incorporate the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People into the fabric of church life.

Since the abuse crisis came to the forefront in 2002, dioceses have taken unprecedented steps to confront the issue, assist the victims, seek forgiveness, ensure the safety of minors and restore credibility.

The continued healing of victims is a primary concern moving forward, said Bishop Gregory Aymond of Austin, Texas, chair of the U.S. bishops’ Committee for the Protection of Children and Young People. “First and foremost, we must reach out to those who have come forward and look for those who have not. We have to give them love and be a source of healing.” He acknowledged that some victims want to deal with the issue on their own, but added, “others cannot and should not.”

“There is a continued need for healing and reconciliation as we move through this very painful time,” said Bishop William Skylstad of Spokane, Washington, president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). “We need to continue to address the plight of victims, to be sensitive to them and hear them and address their needs, if we can.”

The church also needs to let people know what efforts have been made in the past five years.

“I don’t know whether the public understands that the church is the only group that has undertaken a comprehensive program to educate children and the people who work with them,” said Archbishop Harry Flynn of St. Paul and Minneapolis, chairman of the Ad Hoc Committee on Sexual Abuse (which became the Committee for the Protection of Children and Young People). “There is a huge success story to tell, and we’ve told it, but I don’t know if anyone is listening.”

The success includes Safe Environment training for 5.7 million people and background evaluations for 1.6 million people who work with children in the church, according to Teresa Kettelkamp, executive director of the USCCB Office of Child and Youth Protection. “It is impressive to see the number of people in the church who are working to establish and maintain the Safe Environment program,” she said. The training is a centerpiece of the Charter, which the

bishops adopted and called to be implemented in each of the 195 dioceses in the United States.

“We are challenged to be vigilant,” said Archbishop Wilton Gregory of Atlanta, former USCCB president. “We’re dealing with a situation that may have taken many years to come to the surface. We have to be vigilant that we are doing the right thing as we move forward and not grow despondent that the issue has not been completely settled. The victims and their families have been deeply hurt and still need our support.”

Archbishop Gregory recalled being asked by an older priest, “How long is this going to go on?” “In truth,” he replied, “it will be years. It won’t make headlines, but the process of healing will go on for the rest of my episcopate. I will be responding to the needs of people.”

“The priest’s question revealed a desire to go back to the way we remember – but we can’t,” Archbishop Gregory added. “It’s a different environment now. We have to understand that there’s been a sea change and we have to speak honestly and openly.” This, he said, relates to the bishops’ need to reestablish and deepen their bonds with their priests. “They need to know that we love, respect and trust them.”

“We have apologized and we want the church to be purified,” said Bishop Aymond. “Our leadership has been challenged and our credibility has been lost. We have to restore credibility by proving that we are honest and straightforward. Credibility requires words and, more importantly, actions, and it takes time.” Specifically, he said, “We have to live out the spirit and letter of the Charter. We must reach out to victims and do justice and we have to fulfill the mandate of Pope John Paul II, who said, ‘There is no place in the priesthood or religious life for those who would harm the young.’”

“The church is a complex organization with many ministries,” said Bishop Skylstad. “We can’t lose focus on our mission to proclaim and celebrate the Gospel. We are making every effort to see that the ministries of the church take place in a safe environment.”

If there is any possible silver lining to the dark cloud of the abuse crisis, it may be, as Bishop Aymond said, that “the sexual abuse crisis in the church uncovered the fact that sexual abuse in the United States is far more common than we imagined.”

“We have an opportunity to be agents of change for the society,” he said. “Our Charter gives some guidance on how we expect situations to be dealt with, and we have developed the Safe Environment program,” which can be used as a model for others. “We have to integrate the Charter’s tenets into the church,” said Kettelkamp. “The Charter should be part of who we are as the Catholic Church and how we do things.”



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