



## Moving from Compliance to Conversion

By Stephen Kent

“Put this behind us, let us move on” is a response to many scandals. But it is not one available to a church wishing to do more than just what’s required to recover from instances of sexual abuse of children.

The bishops of the United States, meeting in Dallas in 2002, adopted the *Charter for Protection of Children and Young People* in the wake of a national scandal. The *Charter* sets forth specifications and requires annual audits of compliance. Yet compliance is not enough.

“Yes, you are in compliance, but where is your heart in this thing? Where is your commitment?” asked Archbishop Alex J. Brunett of Seattle in an interview. “Shouldn’t we be converted to a process by which we are not only in compliance but are leaders showing the way, telling people how important trust is in the life of the church, how the environment we create is extremely important?”

Leaders must look consider if they “want to spend the time and effort and energy that brings compliance into a conversion process,” and whether “this becomes one of the important ministries of the church,” said Archbishop Brunett.

“If you are a complier, you just take the Dallas *Charter* and say ‘I will comply with what it says I need to do,’” said Archbishop Brunett. “When you are converted you ask how can we go beyond that?”

A way to move from compliance to conversion comes through the Safe Environment Program. The Seattle archdiocese has had policies, training and



Archbishop Alex J. Brunett  
of Seattle



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background checks in effect for almost 20 years before instituting the Safe Environment Program two years ago.

The Safe Environment Program impacts parishes and communities by demonstrating a care for young persons, said Archbishop Brunett.

“There are a lot of people out there who think the church is not sincere, who can’t trust the church,” he said. “But we can show people the way to integrity, honesty and truthfulness,” he said.

Violation of trust was one of the major issues raised by the abuse scandal, he said. People expected that a priest was to call people to deeper spirituality.

“They were taught to believe and understand that a priest would never hurt you,” he said. “There is a deep seated anger, people angry that the church allowed this to happen.”

Archbishop Brunett has seen the anger and bitterness firsthand as he has met with some 70 abuse victims.

“There are some genuinely damaged individuals,” he said. “Some stories are so tragic you can’t believe what has happened. The stories themselves will break your heart.”

Efforts to go beyond compliance can be far-reaching, he said. It can reach out beyond the parish, beyond the school to families that are not even Catholic.

“This is not a Catholic thing, this is a program for all people,” he said.

“Recently a Catholic school parent attended one of our classes and shared information with her non-Catholic neighbor,” the archbishop recalled. “Her neighbor borrowed the handouts from the class. The information helped this lady to identify some concerns she had about a relationship in her own child’s life. It inspired her to talk to her daughter, to ask questions which revealed her daughter was being sexually abused.

“The child was able to receive some help because Safe Environment reached out beyond the church and school,” he said.



“You have some people who are fearful, who say ‘I don’t want my children exposed to this kind of thing.’ We tell them you’re not fearful if they get training for fire safety, for traffic safety,” he said.

“The interesting thing is that the more we do this, the more children are willing to come to their parents and speak up about these things,” he said.

