

## **Best Practices in Safeguarding Children:**

### **Report on Diocese of Wilmington's *For the Sake of God's Children***

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#### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The decade from 2002-2012 has been exceedingly difficult for the Catholic Church in the United States. The beginning was marked by the investigative report published in the *Boston Globe* describing the "crisis" of sexual abuse of minors by Catholic clergy. In June 2002, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops responded to the crisis by publishing the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*, providing guidelines and instructions for responding appropriately to allegations of abuse; to take measures to prevent future abuse; and to implement a "zero-tolerance policy" on abuse of minors by clergy.

In response to the *Charter*, the Diocese of Wilmington developed and implemented *For the Sake of God's Children*; a safe-environment training program for children, clergy, and Church employees and volunteers. In October, 2011, I was selected as Child Protection Consultant for the Diocese of Wilmington and subsequently commissioned to evaluate the policies and procedures of their safe-environment program with emphasis on three components:

1. Education of youth and parents provided by *Keeping Our Promises* (a personal safety curriculum for children in grades Pre-Kindergarten through grade 12)
2. Training provided to seminarians
3. Policies and procedures specific to the mandatory reporting of all forms of child maltreatment (with emphasis on sexual abuse) and training for identifying and reporting child maltreatment required of all church personnel (priests, seminarians, deacons, employees, and volunteers)

The first two components can be conceptualized as "primary prevention." Primary prevention efforts take place *before* sexual abuse has occurred to prevent initial perpetration or victimization. The third component (mandatory reporting) is centered on responding after sexual abuse has occurred, and focuses on identifying victims, responding to disclosures, and reporting to authorities.

Four principles guided my review of *Keeping Our Promises*:

- That a critique of primary prevention work must be underpinned by a clear understanding of clergy sexual abuse.
- That sexual abuse within the Catholic Church shares similarities with sexual abuse of minors in other youth-serving organizations.

- That sexual abuse of minors within youth-serving organizations can best be understood by employing a Situational Crime Prevention framework.
- That educational initiatives must inform youth and their parents, adopt a "whole-school" approach, and extend guardianship by including the broader community of adults.

The most effective critiques of primary prevention efforts are based on standards for prevention education. Unfortunately, no national standards exist to provide guidance for developing or evaluating sexual abuse prevention programming aimed at youth, parents, or staff. To provide an objective, unbiased review of *Keeping Our Promises* and the child protection policies and procedures developed by the Diocese of Wilmington, I developed two evaluation tools to rate the content of school-based prevention education and to evaluate organizational policies and procedures related to safe environments (see Appendices A and B).

The review is based only on materials provided by the Diocese; no formal evaluation was conducted on the effectiveness of these materials. The following ratings and discussion represent this author's point of view based on a review of empirical research along with the author's own experience developing and evaluating prevention programs.

## **KEY FINDINGS**

**Promise #1: Protect the Faithful in the Future (Education of Youth & Parents).** Grade for Youth Programs: A- Grade for Parent Materials: B

The *Charter* directs dioceses to "provide education and training for children, youth, parents, ministers, educators, volunteers and others about ways to make and maintain a safe environment for children and young people." Overall, the Diocese of Wilmington has done a very good job of implementing this directive specific to fulfilling the promise to protect the faithful in the future, especially compared to other youth-serving organizations. *Keeping Our Promises* infuses safe-environment concepts into different classes (multi-disciplinary approach) and across all grade levels (from Pre-Kindergarten through 12th grade), and has created a "safe environment" climate in the schools, where all adults share in the responsibility for keeping children safe. Parents are also informed about all forms of child maltreatment, including child sexual abuse.

In the full Report, I offer several suggestions for improving the content and process of *Keeping Our Promises*. These recommendations include expanding content for students and parents/caregivers, increasing the involvement of parents/caregivers in curriculum development and education of their children, and conducting outcome evaluations to determine the effectiveness of the program in teaching safety knowledge and skills.

**Promise #2: Protect the Faithful in the Future (Education of Seminarians) Grade: A-**

Findings from *The Causes and Context of Clergy Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church in the United States* (conducted by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice) indicate that the majority of priests who sexually abused minors (between 1950 and 2002) appeared to have had certain vulnerabilities to commit abuse (e.g., intimacy deficits; emotional congruence with adolescents), experienced increased stressors from work (e.g., having recently received more responsibilities, such as becoming a pastor), and had opportunities to abuse the children (e.g., unguarded access to minors; minimal oversight of individual priests).

Although the last risk factor points to the need for situational prevention strategies, the other two factors implicate the role priestly formation plays in preventing the sexual abuse of minors. Indeed, Terry, Schuth, and Smith (2012) point out that priests who attended seminaries prior to the 1970s had minimal human and sexual formation, little preparedness to understand and resist inappropriate sexual impulses, and lacked understanding about the extent of the harm caused by sexual victimization or how to maintain appropriate boundaries. In contrast, most of today's formation programs "define the nature of appropriate relationships and the meaning of moral behavior for a priest" (p. 29).

As a supplement to human formation training, the Diocese of Wilmington provides a two-day workshop for seminarians focusing on all forms of child maltreatment, with a particular emphasis on sexual exploitation of minors. The training outline is comprehensive, and students are actively engaged with the material through role-playing exercises. In the Report, I suggest incorporating additional scenarios to help students recognize warning signs of potential boundary violations in others and in themselves, and to include clergy-abuse cases in the instruction. I have also suggested that clergy-abuse survivors be invited to the training to describe the harms caused by clergy sexual abuse and to offer suggestions on how to respond to disclosures by victims.

**Promise #3: Guarantee an Effective Response to Allegations of Sexual Abuse of Minors.**

Grade: A-

The Diocese of Wilmington is clearly committed to the detection and reporting of child maltreatment, as evidenced by the following:

- Purpose of child protection policy is clearly stated: "The Diocese deplores the harm and injury individuals and families suffer because of anyone's misconduct."
- Training about all forms of child maltreatment is mandated and all Church personnel and volunteers are informed about their duty to report suspected maltreatment including sexual misconduct.

- Policies are in place to immediately notify law enforcement and/or child protection officials of allegations received.
- Copies of state reporting laws are available at each agency site.
- There is a clear plan for immediately eliminating contact between accused and alleged victim during investigation.
- A Victim Assistance Office has been created and a Victim Assistance Coordinator is named who makes arrangements to obtain professional services for victims.
- Persons making reports in good faith are immune from civil and criminal liability.

To ensure transparency and consistency in handling suspicions of child maltreatment, I suggest creating a reporting flow chart which clearly describes the steps to follow in the process of reporting.

### **Summary**

I applaud the safe-environment training program developed by the Diocese of Wilmington. Educating and informing all adults in the environment is the best way to "extend guardianship" and the Diocese's *For The Sake of God's Children* does an outstanding job of educating all personnel and volunteers about child maltreatment and sexual exploitation. The school curriculum is unique not only in being grounded in religious teachings, but by embedding the concepts into different curricular areas at all grade levels, providing students with a seamless message about respecting themselves and others. With additional content (particularly in materials provided to parents) and improved organization, *Keeping Our Promises* holds great potential to be an exemplary model for other faith-based institutions, and most importantly, to ensure that children and youth are safe from sexual exploitation.

Respectfully Submitted,

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