

# Successes, challenges mark fifth anniversary of sex abuse charter

WASHINGTON - Five years after the U.S. bishops passed their landmark policies to prevent child sex abuse, they can look back at successes in institutionalizing safeguards and look ahead to challenges in restoring church credibility.

But the basic question is: Are children safer now?

"Absolutely yes," answers Patricia O'Donnell Ewers, chairwoman of the National Review Board overseeing the bishops' compliance with child protection policies.

Structures have been put in place for dealing pastorally with victims who come forward with allegations; millions of parents, clergy, employees and children are being educated on child sex abuse prevention; background checks are being done on clergy and church workers; and procedures have been developed for reporting allegations to public authorities, said Ewers, an educator and former president of Pace University in New York.

For Thomas Plante, a psychologist who treats clergy sex abusers and victims, the policies are good and the U.S. church is setting an example for the rest of society.

But the key to success is "if dioceses and religious orders do what the policies say with integrity," said Mr. Plante.

Implementation has been uneven, he said. "Some dioceses and religious orders are further along than others."

Mr. Plante works with the Diocese of San Jose, Calif., and several religious orders to help them judge accusations and to establish prevention policies. He is also chairman of the psychology department at Santa Clara University in California.

For critics, especially those who are victims, the policies are toothless pledges aimed more at improving the image of the church than at helping to end child sex abuse.

Much of the criticism centers around the issue of the hierarchy's credibility in

fighting abuse because of decades of alleged cover-ups that occurred in some dioceses where bishops allowed priests to continue in ministry although they continually abused children. Some critics have said the cover-ups are at least as bad as the abuse.

Ms. Ewers and other church officials say major tasks now include overcoming the loss of trust in the church, improving the quality of the programs and streamlining church procedures for investigating and judging whether a priest is guilty.

“The U.S. church is trying to create the safest environment that can be humanly created,” said Teresa Kettelkamp, executive director of the bishops’ Office of Child and Youth Protection, which helps dioceses implement the policies and audits compliance.

But church leaders have to avoid “issue fatigue” since protecting children is a never-ending task, she said.

“Some refuse to hear the evidence of the successes of the church,” said Ms. Kettelkamp.

“Others say the issue is behind us. This is not the case either,” she said.

The National Review Board and the Office of Child and Youth Protection were established by the “Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People” approved at the U.S. bishops’ meeting in Dallas June 13-15, 2002. The charter contains the sex abuse prevention policies.

The charter was updated in 2005. Also approved in 2002 by the bishops was a companion document called the “Essential Norms for Diocesan/Eparchial Policies Dealing With Allegations of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Priests or Deacons,” which established legal procedures under church law for applying charter policies. The norms were updated in 2006. The charter and norms have Vatican approval.

Other key charter provisions include:

- Encouraging bishops or their representatives to meet with victims.
- Establishing offices to receive accusations and to provide professional counseling

to victims.

- Setting up diocesan review boards to examine accusations and advise the bishop on policies.
- Permanently removing a priest or deacon from ministry after he admits committing abuse or his guilt is established after an appropriate church process, commonly referred to as “zero tolerance.”
- Improving seminary training and providing ongoing priestly formation programs to strengthen the commitment to celibacy.
- Cooperating with a Vatican-supervised on-site examination of U.S. seminaries.

Besides these practical programs, the charter also commissioned a study on the causes and context of the sex abuse scandal. The study, targeted for completion in 2010, plans to examine how bishops responded to the crisis, the social attitudes in the general society at the time of the abuses and priestly formation programs. It will complement a previous study on the nature and scope of the clergy sex abuse crisis. The nature and scope study gathered statistical data about the crisis from the 1950-2002 period.

For many victims and victims’ advocacy groups, however, the policies “are purely and simply public relations,” said David Clohessy, national director of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests.

The situation for children has only been “marginally improved” because the policies remain a “set of promises” that a bishop can ignore, he said.

To improve the situation, bishops should support expanding the statute of limitations for criminal and civil actions in child sex abuse cases and should publish all the names of credibly accused clergy, he said. The Vatican should make it mandatory for bishops to comply with the charter, added Mr. Clohessy, one of four clergy sex abuse victims who addressed the bishops at their Dallas meeting.

Ewers said the “wounds are so deep” for many victims that “I can understand the anger no matter what” the church does to rectify the situation.

At the same time, "I've seen a dramatic change in attitude by religious authorities toward victims, from confrontation to welcoming," she said, noting that many bishops have met personally with victims.

There is also a need to balance justice for victims with fairness for accused clergy, she said.

Ms. Ewers favored maintaining the "zero tolerance" policy but said ways have to be found to speed the process by which church officials determine if a clergyman has committed an abuse "so someone is not in limbo for years" with his reputation tarnished.

Nor are long delays in making a decision helpful for victims, she said.

A related issue, said Ms. Ewers, is how to monitor priests during the interval when an accusation has been deemed credible but no final decision has been made.

Also under discussion is whether the church should monitor priests removed from ministry after a determination has been made that they abused a minor.

Bishop Gregory M. Aymond of Austin, Texas, chairman of the bishops' Committee for the Protection of Children and Young People, said the church is struggling over the issue of what to do with priests who have been removed from ministry.

There is a fear that, once severed from church control, they can abuse again in the general society, he said.

Deciding how and if this can be done is complicated and bishops have sought the advice of law enforcement officials, he said. "I can't say we have a solution."

Overall, children are safer now, said Bishop Aymond.

"I'm not saying we're finished. We still have a lot more to do. But we are determined to do it well," he said.