

FEATURE

Diocese expands policy to provide protection

By Kathleen Schwar
Staff writer

Society — and the Catholic Church — have come a long way in learning about sexual abuse, diocesan officials say.

Just three years ago, the Diocese of Rochester formed its first formal policy for responding to allegations of priests involved in sexual misconduct. Now it is expanding the policy in light of greater understanding of the issue.

By summer, the three-year-old policy will apply to all diocesan personnel. And it will include responses for sexual harassment (usually involving interference with one's work) and sexual exploitation (most often, interaction during counseling) as well.

"Any abuse of ministry is intolerable. It is an abuse of trust," Bishop Matthew H. Clark commented. "To use the trust people place in you and, if I can use the expression, the power that gives you, for your own purposes is not ethical, not acceptable." When such trust is abused, he noted, people directly involved are hurt, as well as ministerial peers.

The expansion brings the diocesan policy closer to policies of other dioceses. Of the 188, 116 were known to have policies applying to diocesan employees, and often volunteers, as well as their clergy, when the U.S. Bishops' Ad Hoc Committee of Sexual Abuse gathered samples a year ago.

"This is much more comprehensive," noted Barbara Pedeville, coordinator of parish personnel services.

Previously, diocesan procedure involved questioning any priest accused of sexual misconduct.

"Many times it never went further than that, if he denied the allegation," she said. The revisions, suggested by an advisory board, reflect the responsibility the diocese acknowledges and the awareness it seeks to enhance, she added.

"We certainly would have wanted to do it sooner. We just didn't have the personnel that would be needed for the training and following up with it," Pedeville said. Although the diocese cannot yet expand training to volunteers, it would follow the policy in the case of any allegation against a volunteer.

The "real work" will begin with training this fall, Pedeville said. "We hope it will help not only with identifying and bringing awareness within that client group," she said, "but will also help people to identify any sexual abuse or abuse of parishioners by others. Any education we do in this regard will help protect young people and the most vulnerable people."

Training all 1,000-3,000 church personnel will take three years, she estimated, and sessions will continually be offered to accommodate new workers.

The diocese issued its first policy in July 1993, when Pedeville joined Father Bob Ring as an intake coordinator for complaints.

The two estimated they have received calls from 40-50 individuals since then. Their concerns cover various grounds: allegations involving priests who are deceased, in other dioceses, already re-



moved or subsequently removed from ministry; individuals who are not priests; and claims later found inconclusive or false.

Some callers, for example, voiced concern about incidents that occurred 20-30 years ago and involve a priest who has since died or is no longer in ministry.

"They just wanted the opportunity to be able to tell someone what happened to them or a family member," Pedeville said. She said she always asks what they would like the church to do, but that with all of these former incidents there was no request other than for her to listen.

At least four calls were about priests located elsewhere and, Pedeville said, "We called the diocese (or order) involved." She also said the Diocese of Rochester provided counseling to one person who alleged being abused as a child by an priest in another diocese because the diocese involved did not.

Other calls resulted in the removal of two diocesan priests from their positions, as previously announced by the Diocese of Rochester.

Anyone calling with an allegation may meet with Pedeville or Father Ring, who will write up the allegation. The com-

plainant may sign the allegation but is not required to do so.

From there, Father Ring reviews the priest's personnel file to see if it indicates a pattern of complaints.

A pattern of transfers, however, doesn't imply misconduct. Bishop Clark has been known to answer such commonly-made inferences by noting that he held nine positions in 10 years "and I was in no trouble at all."

If misconduct is apparent, Father Ring and Bishop Clark meet with the priest. The priest then may be placed on leave for an evaluation.

Both Pedeville and Father Ring visit the parish involved to hear concerns and "offer as much information as we can give without jeopardizing the case if it is in litigation and without compromising the confidential nature of the allegation," Pedeville said.

Meanwhile, she continued, "My main emphasis is on the victim, the victim's

family, and the community that has been affected."

The diocese has paid for professional counseling for victims, even before an allegation is proven or disproven. Pedeville also informs the complainant about legal options and encourages the person to get independent legal advice.

Local laws vary, but the law applicable in the diocese doesn't require diocesan authorities to report suspected child abuse by a priest, according to Pedeville. She also noted that victims anywhere often choose anonymity over filing for criminal or civil action. (State law, however, does require certain child care providers to report suspected abuse.)

The diocese consults with its advisory board — a private psychologist, two lawyers, two social workers, and a high school counselor — who review the case, which officially remains anonymous.

Their recommendation goes to the bishop, who also considers professional evaluation reports and other information. He has the ultimate authority, and may arrange for long-term treatment for a priest who had abused children, for instance.

Although theoretically a priest could return to the church community after successful treatment, Bishop Clark said, consideration must be given to the victims and their families.

"In the best of worlds, you want to say everyone might be helped to heal sufficiently that things can be resumed," he said. "It is a very painful experience, especially for the victims and family, but there is a lot of pain there for lots of other people, too, and healing of all that is a massive kind of enterprise — not that I've got to do it all that or possibly could, but you've got to attend to it in some way."

"I think the present policy is solid, good and strong — which doesn't mean to say it is perfect," Bishop Clark said. "I think in this kind of endeavor, as experience lengthens, as research is extended, we want to be ready, as we are, monitoring that constantly, to change our policy to put in better insights than we have now."

"We would encourage people to come forward with any unresolved issues, that we are open to listening and responding, and we want to offer help if they need it," Pedeville said. "Our desire is to react responsibly and protect the community, especially our young people."

Pedeville and Father Ring can be reached by calling 716/328-3210 or 1-800-388-7177.

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