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Diocese increases focus on sexual misconduct

An adult choir member tells you the choir director touched her breasts.

A widowed deacon begins a sexual relationship with a woman in the parish where he assists on weekends.

A 21-year-old youth minister is dating a 16-year-old girl in the youth group.

A pastor has a good relationship with his secretary, and confides regularly to her his feelings of loneliness. She invites him to dinner to discuss these feelings in detail. At the end of the evening, he holds her in a long and somewhat passionate embrace.

A pastoral associate makes unwanted sexual advances toward the liturgy director.

These are not imaginary scenarios. According to Barbara Pedeville, diocesan coordinator of parish personnel services, they reflect actual recent occurrences in Catholic dioceses - including the Diocese of Rochester.

What these incidents signify - and how they should be handled - have been scrutinized recently at sexual misconduct workshops that Rochester diocesan officials have been conducting.

"From these workshops, we hope to create an environment to talk about some of these issues that hopefully protect those who are most vulnerable," Pedeville said.

Begun in October 1996, the six-hour sessions are required for all employees in diocesan parishes and Catholic schools, as well as Pastoral Center employees.

Pedeville noted that more than 2,000 people will have

attended these workshops by the time they are completed in the fall of 1997. Additional workshops will begin at that time for parish volunteers, she added.

Father Robert Ring, diocesan director of priest personnel, noted that the workshops' mandatory attendance policy reflects the seriousness of sexual misconduct.

"The issues are so important, all ministers have a responsibility to know the policy," said Father Ring, who conducted the workshops with Pedeville.

The workshops are designed to clearly define three levels of sexual misconduct:

- Abuse. Based on New York state law, this occurs when a child or person who is incapable of consent is manipulated, forced or tricked into sexual touch or sexual contact. A person is deemed incapable of consent when he or she is less than 17 years old; developmentally disabled; mentally incapacitated; or physically helpless.

- Exploitation. A breach of trust resulting from sexual behavior between people employed by, or volunteering service to, the diocese and the people they serve - regardless of who initiates the interaction.

- Harassment. The unwelcome sexual advance or request for sexual favors and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature by an employer, supervisor or co-worker that interferes with employment, promotion or job performance. This includes unwelcome conduct that unreasonably interferes with an individual's job performance

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