

Diocese of New Ulm diligent in implementing "safe environment" program

prevention program planned for all involved with youth

by Fr. Douglas L. Grams

A safe environment used to be synonymous with the structural soundness of the buildings we prayed in, lived and worked in, or the purity of air and water we breathed and drank. Today however, in light of sexual abuse on the part of clergy, safe environment is related to the people who are part and parcel to the lives of children and young people, namely parents, guardians, teachers, and members of the clergy.

As we make the shift from buildings, air and water, we might ask what is the Catholic Church doing to instill confidence in the safety of her young people?

Each Diocese in the nation, in compliance with the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops' Charter for the Protection of Children and Youth, has been developing and updating policies and programs to help prevent the abuse of children by clergy. And if anyone has been harmed, procedures are in place to report abuse, remove the cleric from ministry if found guilty and offer pastoral assistance to help the survivors and their families heal from this terrible crime.

The Diocese of New Ulm has been diligent in its efforts to establish a "safe environment" program which educates clergy, teachers, parents and students, and helps them identify and prevent sexual misconduct. We have had a written Sexual Misconduct Policy in place since 1990 and a Diocesan Review Board since 1993. The Sexual Misconduct Policy has recently been updated to comply with the Charter for the Protection of Children and Youth.

Bishop John C. Nienstedt appointed a new sexual misconduct review board in June of 2002. This review board consists of five lay people and two priests: Michael Boyle, J.D. (attorney at law); Richard Embacher, M.S.W. (social worker); Rev. Douglas Grams, J.C.L. (canon lawyer); Rev. Eugene Lozinski (canon lawyer); Dr. Vanita Mishra, M.D. (psychiatrist); Jerry Neubauer, M.A. (school administrator); and Dr. Ellen Vancura, M.D. (medical doctor). The Board's responsibilities include review of written policies and procedures pertaining to sexual abuse on the part of members of the clergy. The Board also serves as an advisory body to Bishop Nienstedt when claims of sexual abuse are made against a cleric in this diocese. Although the names of the members of the Diocesan Review Board are public knowledge, their work remains confidential.

On April 25, 2003, Bishop Nienstedt appointed Christopher Loetscher, Social Concerns and Family Life Director for the Diocese of New Ulm, as the Diocesan Victim Assistance Coordinator. The role of the Assistance Coordinator is to ensure that pastoral care is being offered to the survivors of clergy sexual abuse.

Besides developing written policies and ensuring compliance, each diocese is to have a safe environment program (an ongoing educational curriculum) to help prevent and identify child sexual abuse. Last fall, priests, pastoral administrators, directors of religious education, Catholic school personnel and youth ministers experienced the first "safe environment" program in our diocese. In the fall there will be a more extensive educational program required for all priests, pastoral administrators, parish staffs and anyone involved regularly with minors. Parents are asked to take part in this "safe environment" program as well. The program will be videotaped so that all new pastoral leaders, catechists and volunteers can learn to prevent and identify child sexual abuse and report it to the proper authorities when they believe a child is being abused by an adult.

This past year the diocese developed a code of professional conduct which was reviewed twice by the priests and pastoral administrators working in the diocese. The purpose of the code is to set a standard of behavior by which all pastoral leaders are committed. They commit to live by and hold one another to that standard. A code of conduct is also being developed for volunteers who regularly work with minors and a separate code of behavior is being rewritten for school children with age appropriate behavior that includes mutual respect for classmates.

For more information concerning the upcoming Safe Environment Prevention Program watch for updates on our diocesan web site www.dnu.org.

Fr. Douglas L. Grams is the Bishop's Delegate in Matters Pertaining to Sexual Misconduct by Clergy.