



Religious orders have made tremendous progress in safeguarding youth. Sustaining those strides forward requires conscious, ongoing commitment.

Young people take part in a Discipleship Week event in the Archdiocese of Boston.

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Youth safety deserves ongoing commitment

THE LAST 18 YEARS HAVE BEEN TRANSFORMATIVE in the American Catholic church, as tremendous resources have been invested in creating safe environments for youth and vulnerable adults. During this time, hundreds of religious institutes, dioceses, and Catholic organizations have worked at developing safe environments for children, youth, and vulnerable persons served in Catholic ministries. From increased screening and training expectations to more swift and compassionate responses to allegations, Catholic organizations have in many instances led the safeguarding efforts for other industries that serve vulnerable populations.

Within this context, vocation directors have an important role in abuse prevention by screening out those who may not be able to maintain boundaries in ministry. Although the pressure can be great to focus on numbers of candidates, experience has shown that focusing on quantity rather than quality candidates can have disastrous effects. It is important to acknowledge that the discernment process has two important functions related to safeguarding. The first is to identify screening issues that would indicate a candidate may not be suitable for religious life in community. These issues might range from personality issues to potential difficulty liv-

ing a vowed life, to a history of difficulty in maintaining boundaries. The second function is to identify formation issues. These are things communities can reasonably expect to develop and change as candidates move through postulancy, the novitiate, and into vows. No candidate is perfect, and we all have areas where we need to develop and grow. The vocation director plays an important role in discerning which issues are screening items and which are formation items. In my experience, directors can be greatly aided in this process through consultation and discussion with an admissions or vocation committee.

These screening functions are complex and require a great deal of support, including opportunities to reflect on your objectivity. It can be tempting to be less vigilant, for example, when a candidate or his or her family is known by your community.

Those of us in the safeguarding field often discuss what we call the “three C journey,” in other words, how organizations move from attitudes of complacency to compliance to commitment. This offers a good framework to assess how well your community and its vocation ministry create and sustain safe environments.

Generally speaking, here are characteristics of each type of organization.

Complacent organizations:

- deny an abuse incident could happen
- hope past success will prevent future abuse
- have few standardized procedures
- tend to have punitive responses
- treat incidents as individual failures (bad apple syndrome)

Compliant organizations:

- focus on reacting to abuse rather than preventing it
- use diocesan rules as the standard of care
- focus their training on identifying and reporting abuse
- have “a policy”
- minimize red-flag behaviors

Committed organizations:

- see creating safe environments as everyone’s responsibility
- schedule training frequently and ensure that it is relevant, impactful, and offered “just in time”
- continually update their best practices
- have a continuous quality improvement process

Not long ago, it was not unusual to hear statements like these: “Our men are good guys, we don’t need to

do all this extra stuff” or, “We haven’t had an abuse case so we must be doing fine.” Thankfully these types of complacent statements are much rarer now for many reasons.

A compliance mindset is demonstrated when religious institutes do what is necessary or required but very little more. The thinking is, for example: “We do what is required by the dioceses we serve in.” This perspective shifts the responsibility for creating a safe environment away from the institute and onto an external entity, like a diocese or Praesidium.

Commitment happens when an institute fully owns the issues of safeguarding. Leadership is loud and clear that this issue is one of top priority, standards are clear, well promoted, and enforced, and there is continual growth and reflection regarding the issue.

There are many good examples of religious institutes adhering to industry best practices when working with candidates. Many vocation directors use behaviorally based questions in their interviews with candidates. (These are taught in NRVC’s workshops Behavioral Assessment 1 and 2.) We know that behaviorally based questions offer directors the ability to see what is and has been, rather than what the candidates would like to project. Conducting multiple interviews with candidates has been another staple of the screening process. In addition, institutes can gain valuable insight from community members who interact with candidates on “Come and See” weekends or other opportunities for interaction with the community. By paying attention to feedback from these sessions, vocation directors and committees can collectively decide what are a candidate’s areas for growth and what might be disqualifying factors.

Vocation directors are often the first person to interact with candidates and as such have incredible influence on the endeavor of safeguarding. Ongoing training, learning from best practices elsewhere, and committing to an attitude of continual learning and improvement are critical to maintaining the integrity of an organization’s safe environment.

Religious orders have made great strides in ensuring youth safety, and with the continued commitment of vocation directors and their communities, these high standards will remain, allowing the gospel mission of religious institutes to flourish. ■

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