



Protecting God's Children for Adults

Staying Focused on the Goal

For the vision still has its time, presses on to fulfillment, and will not disappoint; if it delays, wait for it, it will surely come, it will not be late.^[1]

— Habakkuk 2:3

In the VIRTUS *Online*™ featured article from February 18, 2005, my colleague, Dr. Michael Bland, clearly outlined the 2004 *Annual Report on the Implementation of the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People*. It is clear from the findings that Dr. Bland outlines that we, as Church, have much to be proud of concerning our accomplishments in educational programs to protect children and vulnerable adults from sexual abuse. What is also clear is that we must continue to do this proactive work as long as children and vulnerable adults are in our midst.

Some are angered by the report and dwell on the glass being half empty. Others rejoice in the fact that for the first time in many years the entire Church in the United States is focused and united in one major effort to protect children. Others still remain hurt, alienated, and frustrated that the work has come too late. Some want the problem to go away and are sick and tired of reading about it in the media, and hearing about it in the parishes. What is most important is that we maintain our course and forge ahead. Only together can we continue the good works we have begun and that God has begun in us. (Refer to Philippians 1:6)

We must focus our attention on our goal to educate as many people as possible—to educate those who minister *in and through* the Church—about recognizing, preventing, and appropriately responding to child sexual abuse. We must continue to be united in prayer so that those among us committed to education, the healing ministries, pastoral and liturgical ministries, healthcare and social ministries, and all other ministries and apostolates in the Church, will do their best to bring a renewed sense of faith and a deep and abiding presence of healing, forgiveness and mercy to those who need it most.

No great task comes without great price. No such undertaking can be rushed or covered up. We must continue to rely on the Holy Spirit who inspires us to use our gifts to bring back restored trust in the millions of good lay ministers, religious, and clergy who serve the Church.

Millions have been trained through the *Protecting God's Children* awareness sessions and, together we have done much to prevent children from being hurt. Yet, while we may grow weary and tired on this journey, we need to focus on what is important so future generations can live in security and peace.

As I travel and present the *Protecting God's Children* program, and when I am working in my home diocese with catechists and pastoral ministers, one “speed bump” that I come across repeatedly is “Step 5: Communicate Your Concerns.” It seems as though everyone is willing to do almost everything that the program suggests—except to communicate their concerns when “the behavior of an adult in the faith community gives you an uneasy in the gut feeling” (*A Plan to Protect God's Children*, Narrator, *Facilitator's Manual*, page 50).

In general, people find it difficult to confront those with whom they work or volunteer. Yet, “Step 5: Communicate Your Concerns,” is crucial to the success of our safe environment programs. Nothing will change unless we find the courage to challenge those with whom we work when their behavior causes us concerns.

When we see any type of adult behavior that might place the adult and a child in jeopardy, it is our obligation to do at least one of the following:

- Talk to the person directly.
- Talk to the person's direct supervisor.

- Talk with the supervisor's supervisor (the pastor or principal, for example).

When you address the person directly, be sure to frame your concerns to include the well-being of the adult staff member or volunteer. For example, you can say: "According to our new policies, when you tutor individual students in your classroom after school, you are placing the child and yourself at risk. I would never want anything to happen to any of the children, or to you." This is difficult, because you risk hurting the individual's feelings. But, your method of communicating can help them to become enrolled in the goals of the safe environment program instead of putting them on the defensive. Communicate to them that you are not judging them, but rather are offering your observations to help them provide the safest environment possible for themselves and the children with whom they work.

If you find this type of conversation too difficult, speak directly to a supervisor and be prepared to continue "up the chain of command" until someone in a position of authority assures you that the behavior will be addressed. After all, we must take into account the serious nature of *community grooming* that occurs in many abuse situations.

When a child discloses abuse to you, or you see warning signs that a child is being abused, it is always prudent to immediately report your concerns to civil and Church authorities. Immediately call the child abuse hotline and report your concerns to those who are familiar with these types of cases. And, when you report suspected abuse by a member of the clergy, religious, pastoral staff, or a church worker or volunteer, you must also inform Church authorities so they may take immediate action to stop any wrongdoing and prevent any additional harm.

The work of God is seldom easy, but always rewarding. As a Church, we have been faced with the horrors of sexual abuse in a way we never imagined. As a Church, we put our faith into immediate action by implementing programs to make our communities safe for all children and vulnerable adults. We haven't yet reached the "finish line" but, with God's help, we will continue this important work, never resting until all of God's children are protected and feel safe.

[1] The New American Bible, St. Joseph Ed., Catholic Book Publishing Co., New York, New York, Imprimatur July 27, 1970.