

Controversy brews at Geneva church over child abuse brochure

By TONA KUNZ
Daily Herald Staff Writer
Posted Friday, September 09, 2005

St. Peter Catholic Church in Geneva has on display a pamphlet telling people to call the Catholic Diocese of Rockford if they suspect child abuse.

But it's what it doesn't say that's caused a controversy — to contact authorities.

Critics say they are concerned because it doesn't say to call the police, as the state requires of teachers and the clergy.

Church and diocese officials counter the brochure is part of a larger training program, and because the pamphlet does not advise against calling police, it breaks no law.

Still, in light of recent national child abuse scandals with priests, some Catholics are wondering whether the omission is simply an oversight or an indication of a broader belief among clergy that trouble should be handled internally.

Regardless of the genesis of the pamphlet's wording, it has caught the attention of the Kane County state's attorney's office and Illinois Department of Family Services.

"We are three years into this sex abuse scandal in the church and it just shows how little has been learned by the diocese in Rockford," said Barbara Blaine, president of the national victims' rights group Survivors' Network of those Abused by Priests. "I find it extremely disappointing."

"It certainly begs the question whether the church leaders want to keep information away from police. There is no reason they should be continuing to investigate these incidents. These are crimes."

The suspicion of the church's motives runs especially deep at St. Peter Church, where a former priest there, Mark Campobello, pleaded guilty in May 2004 to abusing the two teenage girls between 1999 and 2000.

Former teachers at St. Peter Elementary School have accused the diocese and school administration of not going to authorities quickly enough when they were told about Campobello's abusive actions. The accusations are at the heart of a civil suit filed against the Rockford Diocese and Campobello by the two girls. The diocese is fighting the claims.

With that as a backdrop, the brochure has become a flashpoint for criticism.

"I do think some people interpreted this (pamphlet) as a bad faith because they already don't have trust in the church," said Owen Phelps, diocese spokesman. "We are not trying to hide things."

Church doctrine

The oversight committee for the church in America — the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops — mandates that every diocese follow "The Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People."

The charter requires every diocese to report allegations of sexual abuse of minors to public authorities and to "cooperate with public authorities about reporting cases even when the person is no longer a minor." The diocese also must advise victims of their rights to report a crime to police and support that endeavor, according to the charter.

But whether individual parishes repeat that requirement in all church material about child abuse hasn't become an issue for the conference.

"Generally, that is not something we address. That is something we leave up to the diocese to answer," said William Ryan, deputy director of communications for the conference of bishops.

St. Peter officials say the pamphlets came from the Rockford diocese about two years ago. Noting the omission, parish officials say they immediately put stickers on the pamphlets adding the advice to call the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services hotline. Some parishioners contend that isn't true.

Regardless, diocese officials say the pamphlet is intended only for employees and volunteers as a supplement to the state forms they must sign, saying they understand mandated reporting laws that require suspected child abuse to be reported to the DCFS hotline. The pamphlet reminds employees to also call the diocese, Phelps said.

Informing the church makes sense because the diocese can decide to remove a priest from a parish even if the criminal burden of proof isn't met, or the victim is older than 18 or past the statute of limitations for a civil lawsuit, church officials said.

Some parishioners say that even if notifying the diocese as well is a good idea, those not trained in mandated reporting might look at the pamphlet and think their church wants them to call only the diocese. The pamphlets were left in the entryway of the church for all parishioners, not just employees and volunteers to view.

St. Peter Church spokeswoman Rama Canney said she was not aware that the pamphlets ended up there, but if they did, that could have come from any of the 800 volunteers who hand out the material.

Diocese officials agree that if the pamphlet was separated from the other educational material and putting it out for non-employees and volunteers, that isn't right.

But it also isn't sinister, they say.

"It looks like an error when you take it out of the context. It was in as part of this group of material. In at least two places mandated reporters are told to call DCFS or civil authorities," Phelps said. "Why be redundant?"

Pattern of behavior?

Critics point out, however, that the omission of advice to call civil authorities isn't isolated to the employee pamphlet.

In the weekly newsletter "The Observer," which goes out to most parishioners, people are told to call the diocese hotline, but they are not also advised to call DCFS or police.

"When bishops don't speak out it encourages Catholics to not speak out. It makes them

somehow feel they are being disloyal to the church," Blaine said. "If they were talking about a shooting or someone stealing money they would not be saying call the chancellor, they would say call the police."

The 1-inch reminder in "The Observer" to call the diocese if you know someone abused in the church is an occasional reminder constrained by space issues, Phelps said. It is easier to offer one number to the diocese hotline, which will tell people to call police or an attorney, as opposed to trying to print contact numbers for the 11 counties the diocese encompasses, he said.

"It is not a case of trying to keep people from going to the authorities," Phelps said. "Whenever the bishop talks about this he says call the legal authorities first and then call the diocese. That is our mantra.

"If we haven't been consistent, then I'm sorry," Phelps said. "We will try harder in the future, but that pamphlet was prepared for a specific purpose."

An isolated case

Much like the Rockford diocese, the Chicago and Joliet dioceses prepare material to teach employees and volunteers how to report suspected sex abuse. But Chicago and Joliet officials said they aren't aware of any material that informs people to call only church leaders.

Most of the printed material outlining abuse notification guidelines are targeted to employees and volunteers. Officials in the Chicago and Joliet dioceses rely on Web sites, school posters and occasional newsletter publications of church policy to inform parishioners.

For example, the Joliet Diocese prominently displays the state hotline number, (800) 25-ABUSE, as well as the state hotline number in church-run schools and on its Web site. The Chicago Diocese lists on its Web site how to report abuse to the diocese or how to directly report abuse to civil authorities.

"Every once in a while we put things in the bulletin when we remove a priest from ministry," said James Dwyer, director of communications for the Chicago Diocese. "We put in the numbers not only for us but also for the Cook County state's attorney and Lake County, wherever it took place, and also the DCFS hotline number.

"I really don't know what (number) makes it easier for people," Dwyer said. "Ultimately, we're going to find out about it anyway whether they call DCFS or us first."

Rockford officials say the pamphlet isn't their only medium of expression either.

The diocese puts in big, red letters the advice to call police first at the top of its Web page section on protecting children. Phelps said that in addition, "The Observer" publishes the diocese sexual misconduct norms and "The Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People," which both advocate calling civil authorities.

The St. Peter elementary school handbook, given to all parents says to "always call the child abuse hotline" and also lists the Geneva Police Department as a contact, Canney said.

Even so, DCFS and the Kane County state's attorney's office have fielded calls questioning whether the language and missing numbers in the pamphlet violates the state's mandated reporting laws by sending a message that conflicts with the state's message to call civil authorities.

While officials from both the county and state say they are concerned and have talked with church officials about the misleading message that could send, no laws were broken.

To make mandated reporters aware of the law, the state requires employers to conduct

training sessions for new hires and refreshers whenever the state tweaks the reporting requirements. Employees must then sign state forms saying they understand their duties.

DCFS spokeswoman Diane Jackson said there has been no complaints that the Rockford diocese failed to train employees in child abuse notification laws. In fact, the diocese goes beyond the initial training and periodic updates and makes most employees, including teachers, sign annual status forms on mandated reporter rules as a type of refresher, Phelps said.

While state officials say that leaving out the advice to call police isn't recommended or even preferred, it also isn't illegal.

"This (pamphlet) is in the context of additional material that also includes the DCFS mandated material," Jackson said. "We don't necessarily construe it as this in itself is contrary (to mandated reporting rules). We don't want to rush to judgment and say this is absolutely wrong you have to have it everywhere, every time.

"We will be monitoring them."
