

## **International conference on safeguarding children**

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I want to begin this by sharing my gratitude for all of you who continue to participate in our diocesan safe environment process aimed at protecting our children: background checks, updating training, filling out forms, teaching and record keeping. Our ongoing goals are abuse prevention and offering healing opportunities for those who have been victimized. I just returned from an international meeting, July 1-5, that deepened my commitment to our participation in all these efforts.

In most years since 1991, the Anglophone Safeguarding Conference has taken place. This month it was sponsored in Rome by the bishops' conferences of Ireland and New Zealand. Attending were representatives from eighteen countries, including several lay people from the pope's safeguarding commission. English-speaking clergy, religious men and women, and lay leaders shared best practices about providing safe environments for youth in our church and communities. At our opening Mass, the homilist characterized our work's goal as making all of us "fit for mission." This year's theme focused on the ongoing formation of laity, seminarians and clergy.

We are in such a "one and done" climate that something needs repeating. That is, safe environment work is an abiding, continuous awareness that must be part of each of us and in each activity we participate in. One of the presenters likened it to putting on our seat belts before any car trip. No one would allow a child to be a passenger if the child were not buckled in. The belts alone are not an absolute guarantee of safety, but they are a necessary first step; they work and they remind drivers to be alert.

There were many wise observations during the five days. We heard that our policies and trainings are not mainly about compliance but about right relations. In this light, safeguarding practices can be an integral part of Confirmation preparation, for example. We were cautioned that a "tick box mentality" is poisonous and to be guarded against. The values of safeguarding are to be integrated into the four dimensions of formation for lay, religious or clerical. Those four dimensions are spiritual, intellectual, pastoral, and human formation.

Laws in some countries have begun to require sex education in the schools. The general idea is that children are safer if they have information that is appropriate to their needs. Our country is divided into fifty states and some territories, so a uniform approach will not be possible. Even so, it is not an easy sell anywhere. So, as one presenter suggested, the church has a role to play in educating parents about how to communicate information to their children. Each individual child will have different questions and different needs that can be addressed by the parents. I say this to make a point that an information or communication blackout at home puts a child at risk in whatever country or culture they reside. Nor does it represent the healthy side of our religion.

One married mother spoke about her diocese's model for taking parents' questions and complaints about parish youth programs. Parents may hesitate to offer a complaint if they fear that their child will be singled out. This possibility must be eliminated. Her diocese offers lessons on how to field suggestions and complaints so that they contribute to ensuring right relationships in whatever activity.

Adult survivors of abuse were there as presenters and small group participants as well. How they themselves prefer to be called differs among English speaking countries. Participants attended from Uganda, Kenya, South Africa and India, among other places. Words carry different weights and meanings across cultures, and this was another takeaway for those of us who attended.