

The Sexual Abuse Crisis in the US, Its Effect on Catholic Youth Ministry, and a Way Forward Through Relational Ministry Utilizing the Developmental Relationships Framework

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Abstract: A sexual abuse crisis has rocked the Catholic Church in recent years and one unintended casualty has been the relationship between adult leaders and youth. This article provides a short history of the abuse scandal, discusses the Dallas Charter, where reforms are detailed and discusses the repercussions of these reforms on adult leaders and youth. My presentation will focus on ways to incorporate the five aspects of the Developmental Relationships Framework into youth programs. Ministers and volunteers will have the means to provide tangible action items for developing positive relationships with young people. These five items include: expressing care, challenging growth, providing support, sharing power, and expanding possibilities.

1. Introduction

1.1. A Brief History of the Catholic Sexual Abuse Crisis in the United States

In its over 2000-year history, the Roman Catholic Church has had many challenges and conflicts, both external and internal, that have reshaped the course of human history. One such date that rocked the Church to its core was 6 January 2002, and effects can still be felt today. On that date, the Feast of the Epiphany, the Boston Globe published a devastating investigative report exposing hundreds of allegations of child sexual abuse by Catholic priests and brothers over several decades within the United States of America. Within days, reports of child sex abuse appeared in every major newspaper, magazine, and television in the United States and international media (Plante and McChesney 2011). These reports became the catalyst for victims across the country to file lawsuits against the Catholic Church. Numerous state laws were passed that extended the statute of limitations for sex abuse cases, and judgments against (arch)dioceses and religious orders amounted to over one billion dollars, causing several Catholic dioceses to file for bankruptcy and Chapter 11 protection (Plante and McChesney 2011).

The USCCB (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops 2011), an assembly of the United States hierarchy, acted quickly to provide “damage control”. At their annual general meeting in June 2002 in Dallas, Texas, the Bishops promulgated the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, commonly known as the Dallas Charter. This charter is a comprehensive set of procedures for addressing allegations of sexual abuse of minors by Catholic clergy and includes guidelines for the prevention of future acts of abuse. In addition, the USCCB created two entities to address the problem of child sexual abuse, including the National Review Board and the Committee on Child and Youth Protection. These two entities shared the mandate of assisting each (arch)diocese and eparchy in implementing a “safe environment” program to ensure safety and security for all children as they participate in Church and religious activities; developing an appropriate compliance audit mechanism to assist (arch)bishops and eparchs in adhering to the Charter; and preparing an annual public report of compliance for each (arch)diocese and eparchy (Gospodarzec 2013).

Furthermore, the bishops charged the National Review Board with the task of commissioning a descriptive study on the prevalence and reasons for clergy sexual abuse in the Catholic Church within the United States. The study was led by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice at the City University of New York, which was tasked to conduct research, summarize the collected data, and issue a report to the USCCB of its findings. Based on their research results, the John Jay College research team reported that the number of priests with allegations from 1950 through 2002 was 4392 out of a total of 109,694 priests who served at some point during that time, the equivalent of four percent of priests in the ministry. The number of individual reports of sexual abuse by priests made known to dioceses by early 2003 was 10,667 (John Jay College of Criminal Justice 2004).

In 2011, Plante and McChesney authored *Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church: A Decade of Crisis, 2002–2012* reflecting on the Catholic Church's status ten years after the Dallas Charter. Essential questions raised by Plante and McChesney included: How well has the Church dealt with the distressing problem of sexual abuse of minors? Are children safer in the Catholic Church now than before? Are there any sex abusers still in the ministry? Were individuals who knowingly failed to protect children held accountable for their inaction? (p. 10).

After hearing from various scholarly and pastoral leaders in the field, Plante and McChesney presented a concluding chapter in the edited book. They stated, “the issue of sexual abuse of children by Catholic clergy and others in the employ of the Church has been taken very seriously by most American bishops” (p. 247). However, due to the canonical nature of near-complete autonomy of bishops to run their (arch)diocese as they see fit, Plante and McChesney found some bishops put minimal effort in or completely ignored implementing the Dallas Charter's guidelines. At the same time, they discovered that much progress had been made, especially in Charter-directed safe-environment programs, zero-tolerance policies, the guidance of local and national review boards, regular audits, better screening of clergy applicants, and quality research by the scholars at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice (p. 248).

Plante and McChesney reported some light at the end of the decade between 2002 and 2012. The clergy abuse crisis in the Church was primarily a historical problem dating from the 1960s and 1970s and that incidents of new abuse cases were infrequent in the decade between 2002 and 2012 after (arch)dioceses began to implement mandated safe environment programs. They concluded their book by stating: “Beyond this decade of crisis, we look forward to a far better Roman Catholic Church, one in which our collective concern that a member of the clergy might harm a treasured child is the worry of a distant past” (p. 250).

Plante and McChesney's book was published in 2011, and in 2013 there was a change of leadership in the Catholic Church with the resignation of Pope Benedict XVI and the election of Pope Francis. In 2014, Pope Francis appointed a Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors and appointed US Cardinal O'Malley (of Boston) to serve as president of the Commission. A year later, Pope Francis approved the creation of a tribunal to investigate and judge bishops accused of protecting abusive priests. Those researching the sex abuse crisis and the media's relentless focus on the matter had hoped the worst was behind them. Little did they know what was about to come.

In August 2018, a grand jury investigation revealed systemic coverup by Church leaders of sex abuse within the state of Pennsylvania. The report, including victims' graphic accounts, detailed alleged abuse by more than 300 priests against 1000 children over 70 years (Zauzmer et al. 2018). The report sent a second shockwave across the Church in the US. It caused several states to open up investigations of Catholic (arch)dioceses and extend the statute of limitation

laws so those abused under the name of the Church could file financial and legal claims (Condon and Mustian 2019). In the summer of 2018, Cardinal Theodore E. McCarrick, a high-ranking retired Archbishop of Washington, was removed from public ministry and tendered his resignation from the College of Cardinals after allegations he abused a teenager in the early 1970s. In response, Pope Francis called for a gathering of the world's bishops in February 2019 to discuss clergy sex abuse (McElwee 2018). As a result of these conversations and other input, Pope Francis, in December 2019, issued two documents applicable to the universal Church. The first one authorized reporting possible sexual abuse behavior to civil authorities when required by law. Document number two lifted the rule of pontifical secrecy, allowing the Catholic Church to share documents and information with civil authorities and allowing victims to be updated on the status of their cases (Gallagher 2019). It remains to be seen how these changes will impact sex abuse cases across the universal Church.

1.2. Dallas Charter

As stated previously, the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, was the response of US bishops to this crisis. It was first adopted in 2002 and then updated in 2018, and directs action in the following matters:

1. Creating a safe environment for children and young people
2. Healing and reconciliation of victims and survivors
3. Making prompt and effective response to allegations
4. Cooperating with civil authorities
5. Disciplining offenders
6. Providing for means of accountability for the future to ensure the problem continues to be handled effectively

Articles 12 and 13 of the Charter essentially mandated “safe environment” training for all priests, deacons, teachers, staff, and volunteers who work with children. They included information about how to sustain and foster a safe environment for minors and mandated background checks on all priests, deacons, staff, and volunteers working with young people (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops 2018).

The Charter did not mandate a specific safe environment program/curriculum or specific (arch)diocesan policies, leading to a patchwork of programs and policies. A 2011 USCCB audit of safe environment programs used by (arch)dioceses and eparchies showed over 100 different programs used across the US. Furthermore, policies related to safe interaction with minors were not consistent across (arch)dioceses and eparchies and created a situation where some (arch)dioceses/eparchies had more stringent policies in place than others. These policies often contained guidelines regarding ministry with minors, behavioral guidelines, adult to youth ratios, and implications of pastoral care. This created a pendulum effect where policies could be found on both sides of the arc, ranging from limited guidelines for adults working with youth in the 1970s and 1980s to the other direction where priests and adult leaders are fearful and act with lawsuits on their mind first when creating youth programming.

The equilibrium position of a pendulum's period is halfway from the left to the right side and is where an object rests. This scientific principle has been used to describe cultural phenomena concerning movement from the opposite end of a pendulum to the other. In the global Catholic Church, this swing did not occur to the same degree in all areas. However, starting in 2002, the Catholic Church's response in the US to the sexual abuse crisis, due to

reasons previously noted, swayed the figurative pendulum to one side. It is important to note that for the safety and security of young people, reforms in the Catholic Church related to sexual abuse were absolutely needed and must be protected. However, at times, individuals and institutions went to the extreme end of a pendulum when a more equilibrium position was needed. Indeed, in a meeting with a Catholic bishop of a diocese in Northern California, the bishop was quoted as saying, “the summer of 2018 changed everything” (personal communication, 10 February 2020) in reference to how the Church engages in ministry to young people.

2. Impact of the Catholic Sexual Abuse Crisis on Catholic Youth Ministry

The sex abuse crisis had broad implications for parishes and (arch)dioceses/eparchies across the United States. As previously stated, every (arch)diocese/eparchy in the US had to develop a “safe environment” program and implement background checks for all adult volunteers, staff, and clergy working with minors. Since 2002 and especially right after the summer of 2018, in many (arch)dioceses/eparchies, the pendulum swung to one side. Sometimes these policies become burdensome and inhibited effective youth ministry. No empirical studies are available examining the role of the sex abuse crisis on youth ministry. However, there are many anecdotal stories of youth ministers across the US on how the crisis has impacted their ministry. A few authors have included the topic in scholarly writings. One such person is Robert Rice who, in 2016, completed a doctoral dissertation titled *Revising the Vision: A critique of how evangelization was articulated in the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Framework for Catholic youth ministry (Renewing the Vision, 1997) in light of related magisterial documents and the history of youth and Catholic youth ministry in the United States*. Dr. Rice presented three specific ways in which the sex abuse scandal negatively impacted the Catholic youth ministry. In addition to a lack of trust, loss of staff, and loss of resources due to payouts of lawsuits, Dr. Rice felt that the final reason was that some safe environment policies hurt adult/teen relationships. Rice states,

One of the few Catholic youth ministry leaders who has been bold enough to speak about this was Frank Mercandante. In his book, *Engaging the Soul of a New Generation*, he wrote: In an effort to protect young people, the responses we have formed through legal policies and guidelines may be hampering, limiting, challenging (and perhaps even driving to extinction) significant relational ministry. These policies often wind up protecting teens from much more than predators. In the end, we protect them from any meaningful contact with adults. The result is that Millennials highly value relationships and are quite comfortable with adults, yet adult Church leaders are afraid to get too close to teens... Overly stringent policies lead to a Church that is more concerned about financial and legal protection than on the active, personal, pastoral care of young people. This results in the loss of the Church’s credibility and the far greater loss of our teens. Mercandante made it clear he was not encouraging readers to ignore the policies. Instead, he suggested that people in youth ministry need to advocate for a change so that “protection and prevention’ can meet ‘practical and pastoral.’” (Rice 2016)

Furthermore, as reported in the scholarly journal *Religions*, McCallion, Ligas, and Serroka conducted an institutional and status analysis of youth ministry within the Archdiocese

of Detroit in 2014 and 2015 and asked pastors about some of the obstacles churches face when deciding to hire a youth minister if at all. McCallion et al. (2016) state:

Other reasons were more along relational lines, especially the issue of priest sexual abuse. One pastor said, “You know, I used to go through the parking lot and the kids would jump all over me, and I would play with them, even some of the 7th and 8th graders, but I can’t do that anymore because of the sexual abuse stuff. That is why I started ‘Hi-fiving’ the kids when I walk down the aisle for Mass—it is allowable because the parents are there”. Another pastor spoke bluntly: “Pastors are scared of the sex abuse thing,” while another said, “Priests are discouraged by the sex abuse thing, and of course they see more losing than winning in terms of the youth, you know, winning them over, most don’t come, and it’s discouraging”. (p. 9)

In his doctoral dissertation titled the perceptions of youth ministers’ leadership role in The Catholic regional Church, Gospodarzec cited Life Teen president Randy Raus when referencing spiritual, organizational, and economic challenges of ministry.

According to Raus, these factors cannot be ignored and left to the next generation. An alarming trend we are watching is that many parishes are considering cutting back or have already cut back youth ministry efforts due to budget concerns and in some cases out of fear-based on recent scandals.

Finally, concerning social media, Shell (2019) in her senior honors thesis on ministry in the digital age wrote,

Due to the fears of safe environment policies, some youth ministers expressed that they were too worried about policy to communicate with their teens over social media. They exclusively used new media and electronic communications to communicate with parents. While it has been explained that communication with parents is essential, completely dismissing social media and not communicating with teens is not the way to go either. There needs to be a balance between communication and preserving a safe environment. This can be done through careful monitoring of social media sites and public posts or with communication apps such as Flocknote. Flocknote is a parish communications management app with different features such as texting and email to communicate with parishioners. Flocknote, an app designed specifically for use within the Church, automatically saves all communications between parties and stores it, complying with safe environment policy standards. Parishioners can sign up for different ministries to receive notifications and information. In this study, 25% of youth ministers noted using Flocknote to reach their teens. They remarked that Flocknote is transparent, yet individualized, which helps them to communicate with their teens without fear of safe environment standards. (p. 48)

All four of these authors touched upon the fear that ministers, both lay and ordained, have expressed when working with young people in the wake of the clergy abuse crisis. As mentioned earlier in this section of the article, no empirical studies are available examining the role of the sex abuse crisis on youth ministry, and the information presented was anecdotally based on the works of four different researchers. To provide another source of information, the staff of the National Federation of Catholic Youth Ministry asked their constituents, who represent pastoral leaders working in Catholic youth ministry across the United States, to

complete a four-question survey that was included in the organization's e-newsletter. This survey was informal, and the results were only suggestive. The questions were as follows: To what extent has the Catholic sexual abuse scandal affected your ministry? What safe environment policies have been implemented by your (arch)diocese? How do you feel about your (arch)diocese's safe environment policies? In what ways have your relationships with youth been impacted due to safe environment policies, including ministry prior to the COVID-19 panic? Twenty-one people responded to the survey. Of that number, 13 were female and 8 were male. Four were from the Midwest, five were from the Northeast, eight from the Southeast, three were from the Southwest, and one was from the West. In terms of experience working with youth, two had between 1 and 5 years of experience, four had between 6 and 9 years of experience, seven had between 10 and 20 years of experience, and eight had over 20 years of experience. The data were sorted by region to determine if there were significant differences in how the safe environment policies affected ministry to youth. In every region, respondents discussed their feelings about the extra paperwork, the training and background check process, and the raised awareness of being with youth. They also reported that the policies had created distrust in youth leaders and had created a situation where it was difficult to establish trust with young people. One youth ministry leader commented that "it's like everyone watching over your shoulder and looking to call the diocese if you make a mistake."

In terms of the safe environment policies implemented by the (arch)dioceses, responses from every region mentioned the needed permission forms, background checks, two-adults for supervision policy, and training programs for both adults and youth. The question of personal feelings concerning the policies elicited many different responses. Responses from all of the regions indicated that the safe environment policies were generally positive, but some policies were too strict. Stringent policies presented tremendous obstacles such as the amount of paperwork being horrid, parents do not come to requested trainings, and parents do not volunteer because they do not want to fill out the forms. In addition, one youth ministry leader stated: "I know of some youth ministers that stepped down from their roles due to the additional workload required for Safe Environment and their fear of increased liability in our litigious society." Some youth ministry leaders believe that the implementation of the policies has gone overboard.

The last question addressed specific ways in which relationships have been impacted due to the safe environment policies. In all regions, a concern was expressed about how it is more challenging to get kids to come to Church activities—in some cases, it is because of the lack of adult encouragement; the fact that it is hard to establish a relationship with another adult in the room; and youth leaders were hesitant to reach out because of boundary issues. Youth leaders mentioned that they cannot call or text youth without another adult present. Others were working through the obstacles and finding ways to express their care for students, to be more aware of student behavior, and to develop a better understanding of the students.

One responder felt that females had an easier time dealing with the changes, so the responses were sorted into female and male categories. The responses to question one that dealt with the extent the Catholic sexual abuse scandal has affected the youth ministers were somewhat different for females and males. Female responses focused on individual needs, such as building relationships and becoming more aware and cautious in their interactions with youth. The male responses tended to deal with institutional issues, like the suspicion around male youth leaders and having to give up long-standing traditions like in-home meetings and single adult

youth meetings. On questions two through four, the responses were basically the same between the two groups.

Given anecdotal data based on the work of four different researchers and data from an informal survey, it appears safe environment policies have indeed negatively impacted youth ministry in the United States. In the words of Mercandante, “How can those working with young people within the Catholic Church have ‘protection and prevention’ meet ‘practical and pastoral’?” One such way of moving forward is the adoption of Search Institute’s Developmental Relationships Framework.

3. Relational Ministry

3.1. Background on Relational Ministry

Catholic youth ministry in the United States, or ministry to those aged 12 to 18, dates to the late 1950s and 1960s with the advent of the Catholic Youth Organization (CYO). In 1972, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), as it is known today, published a document titled “The Diocesan Youth Director” to assist parish youth directors in clarifying objectives and help them determine specific youth programs. This was followed in 1976 with “A Vision of Youth Ministry”, which identified dimensions, components, and principles of youth ministry. In 1982, the National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry (NFCYM) was established, creating a network for diocesan offices and providing resources, leadership, and a vision for ministry. The most recent national document published by the USCCB in 1997 was titled “Renewing the Vision: A Framework for Catholic Youth Ministry” and presented eight fundamental components which included (1) advocacy, (2) catechesis, (3) community life, (4) evangelization, (5) justice and service, (6) leadership development, (7) pastoral care, and (8) prayer and worship.

The US Bishops, in “Renewing the Vision” included the Developmental Assets Framework, which contained forty developmental assets identified through research by the Search Institute. Young people with a higher number of assets were more likely to grow up caring, competent, healthy, and responsible (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops 1997).

The most essential element to effective ministry is the development of relationships or what is referred to as relational ministry. It is what Jesus himself used as he taught over 2000 years ago. Relational youth ministry refers to meeting teens where they are and walking with them closer to Christ. It is the bedrock of quality, transformational youth ministry. Relationships are at the heart of true conversion, and ministers need to be willing to engage in a healthy relationship with young people.

For example, Life Teen, a Catholic movement primarily serving young people, has identified four levels in which relationships can be divided: contact, connect, care, and challenge. At level 1, “contact”, Life Teen encourages adult ministers to let teens know they are interested in them and see them as worthy and important. Level 2, or “connect”, is where youth ministers look for a common basis for a relationship to grow. The 3rd level, “care”, is where youth ministers know about the lives of the teen, and there is trust and respect between the minister and youth. The 4th level is “challenge”, where the youth minister has gained the trust of the teens and has earned the right to be heard (Life Teen 2016). Life Teen identified these four levels as a starting point for youth ministers and volunteers to better understand relational ministry.

3.2. Developmental Relationships Framework

The Life Teen model is a good starting point; however, a more comprehensive model for relational ministry can be found in Search Institute's (2017) Developmental Relationships Framework, first published in 2014. Built upon the work and research of the Developmental Assets Framework, first published in 1990, the Developmental Relationships Framework consists of five elements expressed in specific actions that make relationships powerful in young people's lives. Youth ministers and adults working with youth should focus on these five elements.

1. Express care or show that the youth matters to you. This can be reinforced by being dependable, listening, believing in youth, being warm, and being encouraging. The adult leader should focus attention on the young person when he or she is talking about things that are important to him or her and make an effort to understand the young person's point of view. If the adult leader cannot deliver on a promise, then that person should apologize.

2. Challenge growth and push the youth to keep getting better. This can be accomplished by expecting youth to live up to their potential, stretching youth to go further, holding young people accountable, and helping youth reflect on failures. Adult leaders should talk with a young person about the positive things he or she has to look forward to in the future, teach young people that making mistakes is part of learning, and require young people to take responsibility if they do something wrong.

3. Provide support to help youth complete tasks and achieve goals. The youth leader should model the values, attitudes, and behaviors that you want young people to follow, praise young people for their hard work, regardless of if they succeed or fail, and encourage young people to try things they might be interested in.

4. Share power and treat the youth with respect. It is imperative that the adult respect young people, collaborate with young people, and let them lead. Part of this process is to respect a young person's opinion even when you might disagree. If there is a disagreement, take time to understand each other's point of view, and the adult should be open to changing his or her opinion.

5. Expand possibilities and connect the youth with people and places that broaden their world. Adult leaders should be inspiring youth, broadening young people's horizons, and connecting with them. Introduce young people to new music, art, or activities. Youth leaders should introduce young people to other trustworthy adults who have a similar hobby or interest. Lastly, young people should be introduced to ideas or cultures that are different from their experiences.

Like the Developmental Assets Framework, the Developmental Relationships Framework is rooted in research whereby over 60,000 young people were included in testing and evaluating the concept. However, given the short amount of time the Developmental Relationships Framework has existed, there is still a lot of research to be conducted around the long-term effectiveness of the Framework. Indeed, the Search Institute, supported by the Lilly Endowment, is currently engaged in a research project exploring faith-nurturing relationships in diverse faith communities. Launched in the summer of 2018, the research team is currently examining faith-nurturing relationships young people experience in their congregations, families, and communities through qualitative studies in 12 congregations. They plan to identify relational practices that are particularly catalytic for faith or spiritual formation that can be more intentionally and inclusively nurtured in and through faith communities.

With the USCCB's inclusion and promotion of the Developmental Assets Framework in "Renewing the Vision", it seems logical for those working with young people in the US Catholic Church to learn more about the Developmental Relationships Framework and consider adopting the Framework to guide youth ministry in parishes. The late Peter L. Benson, the creator of the Developmental Assets Framework, once stated: "After decades of forming hypotheses, conducting surveys, crafting and rewriting definitions, analyzing data, and writing journal articles, the Search Institute researchers and practitioners have arrived at a surprisingly simple conclusion: nothing—nothing—has more impact in the life of a child than positive relationships."

While safe environment policies exist for the critical purpose of keeping youth safe, adoption and incorporation of the Developmental Relationships Framework into youth ministry programs provide ministers and volunteers with tangible action items to develop healthy and caring relationships with young people. Perhaps the adoption of the Framework by the Catholic Church at the parish, diocesan, and even national level is a step in the direction of ensuring "protection and prevention" meets "practical and pastoral" while at the same time providing greater equilibrium so that the pendulum does not sway to either extreme. Research has shown that our young people need caring adult role models in their lives, and while the sexual abuse scandal has negatively impacted healthy relational youth ministry, adopting the Developmental Relationships Framework is one possible way forward.

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