

## ***Expressing Concerns - Effective Communication***

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How does one express a concern directly to an individual who whether, unknowingly or knowingly, doesn't fully implement the Protecting God's Children® principles? What if that person is a director of religious education, a youth leader, or a priest?

When one sees a ministry situation that causes unease, several questions naturally follow: "What should I do?" "How do I approach the person?" "What should I say?"

Through the Protecting God's Children program, we learn that by speaking with someone, we are "not accusing someone of being a child abuser; (we) are simply pointing out something of concern." The following account illustrates the value of moving beyond any personal reluctance to speak up.

A young woman from Europe who was spending her senior year as an exchange student at a high school in our diocese wished to become Catholic. Although her English skills were good, for such an important step in life she wanted to be able to explore the faith and ask questions in her primary language. She approached a priest who was a native of her country and a senior pastor at a parish in our diocese and inquired if he would guide her on her faith journey. He agreed, and they arranged to meet in his rectory office on Wednesdays after school.

In this particular parish, a secretary was employed on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays from 8 am until 3 pm. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, a business manager was present from 8:00 am until 4:30 pm. Therefore, when the young woman kept her appointment on Wednesdays, no one else was in the building.

A friend of the priest who was familiar with the parish staff arrangements realized that the Wednesday appointment was not the best time for the young woman to be at the rectory office. After giving the matter some thought, the friend simply said to the priest, "Father, I need to point out to you that you've arranged to meet with this young woman at a time that is not in her nor your best interest. Did you realize that she will be coming to the office on a day when no one else is scheduled to be there, and people are not in and out at that time of day? She obviously needs to meet sometime after school; is there any way she could come on Tuesday or Thursday when the business manager is working?"

The priest looked up and said, "I never even thought about it that way. I'll call immediately and change the appointment day!" He simply told the young woman that Wednesday was not a convenient day for a regular appointment. The following week, the young seeker continued her faith journey on Thursday and on all the Thursdays thereafter until she was received into full communion with the Church.

The priest later expressed appreciation to his friend for raising his awareness and helping him to implement the Protecting God's Children principles in a very concrete and practical way, stating, "I would never want to do anything that would cast a shadow over someone who is seeking God's will."

Providing feedback about this observed ministry situation accomplished several things:

- It provided a safe environment for the young woman who wished to learn more about the Catholic Church.
- It provided a safe environment in which the minister could answer her questions in a way that best met her spiritual needs.
- It resulted in a change and cleared background “noise.” Therefore, someone else who refuses to change behavior or who repeatedly ignores standards and rules will stand out. When inappropriate actions are more obvious, a quick intervention can be made to prevent abuse.

The constructive attitudes of all involved in the this scenario also attest to the importance of establishing supportive environments in which helpful observations for improvement are not only tolerated, but welcomed.

Those of us engaged in the Church’s many forms of ministry must be willing to express concerns. We must *also* be open to feedback from others. It is important for us to view our actions through others’ eyes. When we are willing to make changes, we, too, create an environment where the warning signs of a potential abuser become obvious, thus we become even stronger protectors of children.

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