

DEVELOPING PARISH HANDBOOKS

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

“A parish is a community of the Christian faithful established within a diocese. The pastoral care of a parish is entrusted to a pastor under the authority of the diocesan bishop. The parish is ‘the primary experience of the Church’ (*OHWB*, #114) for most Catholics. It is where the faithful gather for the celebration of the sacraments and the proclamation of the word of God, and where they are enabled to live distinctively Christian lives of charity and service in their family, economic, and civic situations. It is ‘the living and permanent environment for growth in the faith’ (*GDC*, #158). The parish energizes the faithful to carry out Christ’s mission by providing spiritual, moral, and material support for the regular and continuing catechetical development of the parishioners.

The parish is the preeminent place for the catechesis of adults, youth, and children. ‘Knowledge of the faith, liturgical life, the following of Christ are all a gift of the Spirit which are received in prayer, and similarly a duty of spiritual and moral study and witness. Neither aspect may be neglected’ (*GDC*, #87). Pastors have the duty to provide catechesis; parishioners have the reciprocal duty to participate in and support the catechetical activities of the parish. Parish catechetical efforts should be in harmony with the catechetical goals and objectives of the diocese.

National Directory for Catechesis, Ch. 9, #60, p. 254-255

The parish is the Church’s prime agent for religious education. In a broad sense the parish educates through everything that it does. The parish community forms its members by the way it worships. It leads the parishioners to an understanding of what it means to be Church through the kinds of services provided to them. The parish teaches its members about charity through the contributions given for those in need and about justice by the stands it takes on social and moral issues of the day.

While parents and families retain an essential role in the formation of their children as witnesses to faith both by word and example (*Gravissimum Educationis*, #3; *Code of Canon Law*, c.226), the parish remains an essential component in religious education (*Catechesi Tradendae*, #67-69). It is the parish as a whole which is the driving force in any organized and systematic effort at religious education. The entire parish educates in a formal way through programs of adult formation and Catholic education for all children and youth, both in the parish religious education and school programs while supporting those involved in homeschooling.

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A successful religious education program requires the support of the parish in specific areas. The parish bears the responsibility to secure qualified catechetical leaders and catechists and to see to their ongoing ministerial development. The parish must provide appropriate and sufficient materials and equipment, including suitable facilities for religious education. It must assess and strive to improve the quality of its religious education programs and staff. These tasks are not simply to be done in the name of the parish by the pastor and parish staff. The whole parish is obligated to see to it that these duties are accomplished.

CT, #67

Two clearly developed handbooks, a parent/student handbook and a catechist/staff handbook, are important tools to insure that all people involved in the parish program are aware of their rights, expectations and legal responsibilities. Handbooks serve as agreements among all parties and

have contractual implications when properly used. The following is provided as a guide to be used in the preparation of appropriate handbooks for the parish. These will help insure that all areas of law that pertain to a particular religious institution/program are sufficiently covered.



RATIONALE

Core Christian values such as respect, responsibility, trustworthiness, fairness and caring are basic to the moral life of individuals and all have a right to expect and promote such values. These values affirm human dignity. Called to be Christ for one another, Christians can strive to do no less than he did when relating to others. It is right and just that these values be protected and lived. These principles are clearly articulated in a body of literature commonly referred to as Catholic Social Teaching.

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The recognition of and adherence to these values are most urgent in situations where children are concerned. Children have a right to be protected and they depend on adults for that protection. If adults fail them, they lose not only the basic building blocks of a whole and stable personality but also the foundations of faith itself. Faith in God has its roots in the faith people have in each other. These realities create a moral imperative for those charged with responsibility for children and youth to be attentive and proactive for the welfare of those entrusted to their care. Beyond the moral implications involved in this work as catechists and administrators, there are also legal implications of which all must be aware.

Those responsible for religious education at all levels must understand that they have legal responsibilities. The reluctance of courts to intervene in church and religious matters is a thing of the past. New challenges are present at this time in history and it is important that all involved in parish programs be made aware of their liability. This includes the entire operation: those serving and those being served as well as the use of property/buildings, the hiring and supervision of employees or volunteers, the organization of field trips, and the protection of children. It is the leader's responsibility not only to know their own responsibilities, but to inform all program participants' (parish staff, catechists, parents, students, etc.) of their rights and responsibilities.

Several points are important to remember in the preparation of a handbook:

No amount of prior agreement (e.g. signed permission slips) precludes the parents' rights to pursue legal action in the case of an accident. Issuing handbooks and requiring permission slips helps to demonstrate that you have attended to your obligations. They are not in and of themselves a defense.

The administrator who develops a handbook is more responsible for carrying out the provisions of the handbook than are those for whom the handbook is intended. **Be certain that provisions set forth in a handbook are applied consistently and uniformly.**