

**SOCIETY POLICY ON PREVENTING AND DEALING WITH THE
ABUSE OF MINORS AND VULNERABLE ADULTS**
(MANUAL OF POLICIES AND PROCEDURES, Revised 2018, PAGES 19-22)

Safeguarding and Communion

At our 2012 General Assembly, we understood Columban mission in terms of a call to participate in the mission of God to bring about communion, in which all live in right relationship with God, other people and creation. “God ‘missions’ the Son and the Spirit into the world to heal the wounds of sin and division. The world God wants is a world where all brokenness is mended, where all divisions are reconciled, where *shalom* (unity and peace) prevail throughout creation, and every human person is loved, respected and honoured as a son and daughter of God.”¹ We are called to be instruments and signs of God-given communion, promoting right relationships and doing all we can to restore communion when it is broken. The abuse of minors and vulnerable adults shatters communion in a most shocking way and leaves people broken and deprived of the peace God wishes for all. As ministers of communion, we must commit ourselves unreservedly to protect minors and vulnerable adults from abuse and to heal the brokenness of the victims of abuse.

Safeguarding and Solidarity

Columbans have become increasingly aware that mission involves solidarity with the excluded and marginalised in our world. Our mission brings us to places of great poverty, hardship and strife to be with the most vulnerable and to support them as best we can. Hopefully, this gives us a real empathy with victims of abuse. In many places where we work, the Church has been shamed by the

¹ *Integrity in Ministry*, A Document of Principles and Standards for Catholic Clergy & Religious in Australia, 2004, p. vii.

way minors and vulnerable adults have been abused and deeply hurt by the very people who profess to minister to them. “We feel deep sorrow that our record includes serious abuse of minors by some of our members and we are shamed further by the failure of the Society to adequately respond to these situations.”²

Living a Culture of Safeguarding

“Abuse cannot be addressed through safeguarding procedures alone, necessary though they are. Though intensely personal, abuse is at the same time about an institutional failure and the ecclesial culture that supported it.”³ There is need for institutional conversion and repentance, leading to the promotion of a culture of safeguarding in the Church. A safe and nurturing culture promotes such shared attitudes and values as openness and transparency, responsibility and accountability, compassion and support, justice and integrity, love and respect. It involves a willingness to question, challenge, learn and change.⁴ While all have a role to play in promoting a culture of safeguarding, Society leaders have a special responsibility to ensure that a culture of safeguarding is both understood and embraced in the Society.

Safeguarding as Ministry

Safeguarding, in a spirit of Christ-like pastoral service, is a ministry integral to our mission and not just a response to a current and hopefully passing crisis which distracts us from our real mission. Along with fostering a culture of safeguarding, we need training and professional help if we are to be effective safeguarding ministers

² *Called to Communion*, p. 24

³ James Hanvey SJ. 'Quo Vadis: Reflections on the shape of the Church to come,' in *America*, vol. 208, no. 9, March 2013.

⁴ See *Towards a Culture of Safeguarding* (2012) from the National Catholic Safeguarding Commission (NCSC) for England and Wales.

today. Greater understanding of the nature, effects, causes and signs of the abuse of children and vulnerable adults is also necessary. The Society policy needs to be based on best practice and aligned to good Church policies which in recent years have emerged in places where we minister. We need to work closely with local diocesan and other ecclesial offices, as well as with other religious congregations. A ministry of safeguarding requires a familiarity with our Society Safeguarding Policy, ecclesial policies at local and national levels, and civil law. Furthermore, effective communication and a commitment to follow established procedures are essential to the ministry of safeguarding.

Our Society Commitment

The 2012 General Assembly recommended that the Society should update its own policy in relation to the sexual abuse of minors and that, once this work is completed, individual Regions/Mission Units would revise their own policies.⁵ The Society has undertaken a prolonged consultation process and has decided that the appropriate way forward is a two pronged approach – firstly, for the Society to commit to a series of principles in relation to the protection of children and vulnerable adults and in particular in relation to the prevention of the sexual abuse of minors and, secondly, for the Society to set certain standards in relation to Society procedures and policies and ensure those standards are met in each Region and Mission Unit. As part of this commitment, the Society has put together a series of very detailed Guidelines to facilitate individual Regions/Mission Units to draft their own individual policies. This document is available in the *Guidelines for Policy Development for Preventing and Dealing with the Abuse of Minors and Vulnerable Adults* Booklet.

⁵ *Called to Communion*, p. 24, recommendations 1 and 2.

The Society has committed to having in place appropriate structures and procedures in all its Regions/Mission Units. For those Regions/Mission Units which already have a policy in place (or who have adopted local Church policies and procedures), the Guidelines contain a detailed checklist setting out the Society's standards in the most important areas of child protection. It is a matter for each Region and Mission Unit to have in place its own policy but that policy must meet the standards set down in the Society's Guidelines, save where specific local circumstances justify a deviation from these standards. Any such deviation from the Society's standards must be approved in writing by the Society's General Council. The primary responsibility for ensuring that each Region/ Mission Unit has in place an appropriate policy rests with the Regional Director or Mission Unit Coordinator. The General Council retains an oversight and supervisory role. Every Region/Mission Unit must submit its own policy to the General Council for approval. To assist Regions/Mission Units which do not as yet have a detailed child protection policy, the Guidelines contain a sample policy which can be adopted in whole by Regions/Mission Units and adapted by the Regions/Mission Units as appropriate.

Policy and Procedures

While no set of procedures or policies can ever be said to be absolutely effective, in an effort to introduce a Society-wide set of procedures, the Society has made the following commitments:

1. The Society is committed to the adoption of clear and binding procedures in every Region/Mission Unit for the prevention of abuse of minors and vulnerable adults and for the transparent and proactive investigation and management of any complaints received.

2. The Society is committed to reaching out to victims of abuse and supporting victims of abuse who come forward.
3. The Society is committed to adopting a detailed scheme for the management of persons against whom allegations have been made, particularly in relation to putting in place systems for the assessment of any risk that such a person may pose to children and/or vulnerable adults and steps to restrict the ministry of such persons.
4. The Society is committed to a detailed and systematic process of reporting all relevant complaints and information to the civil authorities and, where appropriate, the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith. The Society is strongly of the view that it can only be said to be managing such complaints appropriately where the appropriate child protection and law enforcement agencies in a particular country are aware of any complaints that have been made.
5. The Society is aware that appropriate and detailed record keeping is the key to managing risk and the Society is committed to a system of such record keeping.
6. Where appropriate, the Society confirms that individual Regions/Mission Units will engage in appropriate vetting of members/students/lay missionaries/volunteers and employees and to the appropriate training and education of members/students/lay missionaries and volunteers.

7. The Society is committed to putting in place appropriate local structures and personnel for child protection purposes, particularly where such structures are not available in the local church.

8. The Society is committed to each Region/Mission Unit putting in place their 'Policy on Preventing and Dealing with the Abuse of Minors and Vulnerable Adults' and reviewing on an annual basis its local policies and all active child protection files.