

Protecting God's Children for Adults

Clergy-Abuse Survivors Weigh In on Child Protection Efforts

By [Teresa Pitt Green](#)

In 2017, *The Healing Voices Magazine*, founded and edited by an online community of Catholic clergy-abuse survivors, conducted a survey of those readers who were abused by priests or who were family members of clergy-abuse survivors. The stated goal was to articulate ways for the Church to improve its outreach to survivors. Questions specifically addressed the survivor healing Masses, prayer services, discussion groups, presentations, healing gardens and diocesan safe environment programs—which are outlined below.

Survey results revealed how the Church's efforts at healing and reconciliation were viewed as going well, and sometimes falling short, and allow for improvements in outreach to those in need. What is clear is that there is a foundation on which to build now. Other results may be particularly helpful for caring adults who are involved in protecting children from abuse, because one trend in responses ended up being a testimony about how efforts to help clergy-abuse survivors also offer some of the best ways to advance the cause of child abuse prevention.



Not surprisingly, the survey found that the priority for all survivors, without exception, was that no child would suffer the abuse we endured as minors. Most survivors were familiar with the goals of diocesan child abuse professionals working within the Church and shared the strong view that their work needed to be supported and empowered fully to advance child protection guidelines, such as those found within the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People (Charter)*. Relatedly, a shared priority for all survivors was the importance of a credible and active diocesan safe-environment program to ensure the safety of children.

Among various options in survivor outreach, Masses for healing were favored by those survivors and family members who had managed to stay Catholic after clergy abuse (there are many of us). Some dioceses schedule these regularly. Many of the survey respondents disclosed receiving a sense of healing in these Masses. Some survivors felt the need to "work up to" attending Masses in order to de-sensitize their memory triggers; even if they helped plan for a Mass they might not attend "this year." A few took comfort in knowing the Mass was happening but did not intend to attend it, having not been back inside a church in years.

Prayer services were favored by those survivors and family members who had left the Church or who were more comfortable in less formal, lengthy and crowded services. Whereas Masses tend to be at the diocesan level, prayer services are almost all held within parishes or parish clusters. So, prayer services, survivors reported, when handled adeptly, provided healing experiences while also connecting parishes to healing as communities and to the inspiration of survivors' resilient faith.

Discussion groups seemed to be an anchor for most survivor communities, but pitfalls were reported by survivors. In general, discussion groups for clergy-abuse survivors vary in format and structure. Some follow a methodology for process, others proceed as a dinner and evening gathered in a retreat house living room. Survivors reported how this type of activity engaged parishioners or a retreat house in the issue of abuse and, by motivating these participants, opened a door for a follow-up evening promoting child protection or for a similar presentation.

Less commonly reported were parish events which were geared toward promoting the idea of child protection. Survivors recounted their diocesan contacts as discouraging the idea, but in the one instance where the survivor was in the lead of organizing the event—and spoke at the prayer service—the program was highly successful. In that case, the parish annually now holds a prayer service during April, the National Child Abuse Prevention month, in which blue pinwheels are planted in public areas as part of the national gesture to prevent child abuse. At this prayer service, information is provided about child protection programs within the Church but also about child protection facts every person should know. Survivors viewed it as a community service by the parish.

Survivors also offered some valuable tips for how to make these events less difficult for Catholics who are not familiar with the issue of child sexual abuse. One is that, rather than ask children or parents to sit through a speech about abuse within the context of a prayer service or larger event, the prayers and material should focus on the intention of celebrating children and teens' well-being, growth and dignity. They thought that by taking the positive approach, more would attend, fewer would leave troubled, and the child or teen that no one knows is suffering would receive the most important message of all.

Survivors' survey responses also highlighted an important issue when managing a growing survivor community. As background, every diocese in the United States has a victim assistance program geared to provide outreach to victims of clergy sexual abuse. Some dioceses have opened up their survivor programs to all survivors of abuse, not just abuse by clergy or others with authority in the Church. Survey results described these newcomer members as less versed in the facts of child protection

already established in the Church—or even more generally—and this lack of knowledge reportedly had created some strain between members in merged groups. The suggestion was to offer a presentation on the topic of what the Church is doing to protect children, to be sure all members of the group share the same knowledge base.

Most survivors acknowledged that healing gardens or other memorial sites seem to attract controversy, but they liked the idea of participating in creating that space nevertheless. They thought opening such a garden or place would create an opportunity to promote child protection as well as inform Catholics and others what the *Charter* has achieved in the United States.

Based on the surveys and survivor responses, below are some items that you could personally do to do assist with survivor events, which can both foster healing and reconciliation for survivors, and also protect more children:

- Ensure that any planning for a parish-level healing prayer service includes input from survivors and have an additional presentation on child abuse prevention for parishioners; offer information that empowers action by all who attend in terms of keeping children safe. Consider contacting your diocese to see what events are currently on the calendar.
- Make a parish and diocesan call for specific events highlighting the National Child Abuse Prevention Month in April that include prayer services and information fairs.
- Encourage clergy-abuse survivors to become partners in planning events and in promoting child protection now in the diocese and in the community, with optional presentation opportunities.
- Create a healing garden or space where anyone in the diocese could drive to spend time and reflect; make sure child abuse prevention materials are available there. If your parish doesn't have one, consider addressing this.
- Keep in mind that your own presence and mindful listening could be a healing space for some. Learn more about healing, spiritual dialogue with survivors and their family members.

Overall, efforts to involve survivors in safe and gentle activities with the Church to find healing are, in themselves, worthy and essential. Yet, survivors saw these events also, if handled courteously, as opportunities to involve Catholics in the promise of "never again" by providing tools and taking the opportunity to show what the Catholic child protection programs are all about. Moreover, in settings such as these that disarm defensiveness, information can be provided to empower them to make child protection choices in their own lives.

In almost every instance, survivors saw the media as an added opportunity to protect children. Survivors welcomed press coverage that remained at a respectful distance from attendees. They all believed that the message being given was that child protection matters now, and they valued that message reaching every person in the diocese and everyone watching local news. Some reported being open to partner with the Church to emphasize a child protection aspect of the event—and to be the best spokespeople, and most enthusiastic supporters for child abuse prevention!

The plus of media is to amplify the message we survivors offer again and again regardless of the type or perpetrator of abuse. We are ever aware of the children and teens who are right now enduring abuse. Youth are the most important target for the messages delivered by these events to a broader group. In these settings, victims suffering in secret can see their dignity and future openly being prayed for by a large community of faithful people. When such a message reaches into the shell of isolation that is created by an abuser, freedom and hope take hold. While child protection professionals may not be able to quantify this category of success, it is the most important of all. Trust me. I know. I've been there.

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