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Meeting on sex abuse expands reach, promoting global approach

by Carol Glatz by Catholic News Service

Vatican City — Once representing only English-speaking countries, the Anglophone Conference on the Safeguarding of Children, Young People and Vulnerable Adults is going global.

For the past several years, growing numbers of delegates from the church in Latin America, Asia and Africa have been attending the annual gathering.

Begun in 1996, the conference was meant to be a venue where representatives of bishops' conferences in English-speaking countries could share experiences and best practices in the prevention and handling of the scandal of sexual abuse.

But because of the growing number of developing countries attending, "the flavor of the conference has certainly changed," said the chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on the Protection of Children and Young People.

Bishop R. Daniel Conlon of Joliet, Ill., said delegates from countries that have been dealing with a large number of abuse cases for a long time "and have rather highly developed approaches to this issue are now working with countries that have a very different experience."

While it is a challenge to put together a program that will be applicable to dissimilar situations, "I also think it is healthy for the church to have this diversity," he told Catholic News Service.

As a result, he said, the May 31-June 4 conference, co-hosted by the United States and Sri Lanka, featured speakers who gave "a more global perspective" of the church's efforts.

Deacon Bernard Nojadera, head of the U.S. bishops' Secretariat of Child and Youth Protection, told CNS that developing countries are "still having to deal with different cultures and aspects of how the issue of sexuality and sexual misconduct is handled."

For example, in some Asian cultures, the natural sense of shame felt by a victim is so strong that the person only thinks about "trying to save face," and they "would rather not talk about it and would rather just kind of quietly slip away" from the church community and the public eye, he said.

But if no one comes forward, he said, it makes addressing and stopping abuse extremely difficult.

Even though there have been fewer cases of abuse reported in Asian and African countries, church delegates at the conference said they know that doesn't mean they are immune, Nojadera said.

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Delegates from Africa recognized sexual abuse "is a universal situation and they're indicating that it's probably just a matter of time when folks start feeling comfortable about being able to report this kind of misconduct," he said. They "want to have policies and procedures in place" so they will be ready for possible allegations and prevent future abuse.

In fact, he said, the 2011 mandate by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith requiring all dioceses in the world to develop guidelines on handling allegations of abuse "was a wonderful beginning" to prompt bishops' conferences and superiors of religious orders to start dealing with the problem.

He said U.S. Fr. Robert Oliver, promoter of justice in the doctrinal congregation, told the Anglophone conference that all the world's major countries have complied with the requirement to draw up guidelines, which are now being reviewed by the Vatican. Most of those who did not meet the 2012 deadline are bishops' conferences in Africa.

Nojadera said the African bishops or church representatives he has spoken with at the Anglophone conferences know developing guidelines is a priority, but that they just don't have the staff or expertise to draw up the detailed and thorough strategies.

"They attend these conferences and they're just overwhelmed, there's just so much to do, it's such an enormous task that they don't know where to begin," he said. That is why the conference is so important; it allows them to network and forge relationships with countries that have plans in place and can offer assistance, he said.

One of the topics discussed during the meeting was the problem of pornography and how mobile devices will only increase the ease and amount of access people will have to this material, the deacon said.

Church-run institutes and organizations will need to be "proactive" in setting up policies and installing software to counter access to pornographic content, which is known to be addictive, he said. In addition to deterrence, he said, education and imposing "consequences if someone is caught" are important.

Conlon also said psychologists were invited to discuss how to assess the degree of risk a known sex offender poses to the rest of the community and how to create a safety plan for offenders that limits their ability to abuse again, but takes into account their spiritual, mental and psychological conditions "so you have a better sense of the person you're dealing with."

Some 56 delegates representing 20 bishops' conferences around the world attended the 2013 conference; Kenya and Poland were among those sending delegates for the first time, Nojadera said.

Conlon said Ireland and Chile will co-host the 2014 conference, which again will be in Rome since it's a good location for people traveling from all over the world.

Holding it in Rome, Nojadera said, also "allows the Vatican to see there are folks on the front lines really trying to work at this situation."

Nojadera said Chile is also looking to build on the Anglophone Conference model and create a Spanish-speaking conference for networking and addressing sex abuse.

Conlon and Nojadera were part of a four-person delegation representing the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. The others were Al J. Notzon III, chairman of the National Review Board, and Mary Jane Doerr, associate director of the U.S. bishops' Secretariat of Child and Youth Protection.

The Australian delegation included Archbishop Philip Wilson of Adelaide as well as Sacred Heart Missionary Fr. Tim Brennan and Mercy Sr. Denise Fox -- both executive officers of the joint committee of the country's bishops' conference and Catholic religious called the National Committee for Professional Standards.

One of the conference participants was Jesuit Fr. Hans Zollner, chairman of the steering committee of the Center for Child Protection at Rome's Pontifical Gregorian University. He met with Pope Francis after attending Mass with him at the Domus Sanctae Marthae residence Tuesday.

Zollner told Vatican Radio that after telling the pope about the work to promote child protection worldwide, the pope said such work was very important and that "we have to go forward with this commitment."

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