

Minors working with minors: Boundary guidelines

—Twenty-sixth in a series.—

Christian Service is a major component of all Religion requirements in Catholic high schools, Confirmation programs and youth group activities.

And youth who work with youth, as well as adults who work with youth, are required to know and respect appropriate boundaries as they interact in performing their service.

“Our Catholic Church is a ‘servant community,’” emphasizes Congregation of the Holy Faith Sister Angela Hallahan, director of High School Religion Program and Certification of Religion Teachers in the Department of Catholic Schools. “By introducing our secondary students to Christian Service, we help them to reflect on the needs of their community and the wider world.”

Through service, Sister Angela explains, young people engage their faith “with a sense of mission and concern as they respond to these needs, while at the same time laying the foundation for life-long service, their vision, finding their voice and following Jesus.”

Michael Norman, associate director in the Office of Religious Education and Youth Ministry, adds, “Christian Service reminds youth that we are all part of the Body of Christ. Service calls youth to be active members of a caring community, a community of believers. The emphasis is on the communal aspects of our faith leading young people beyond themselves.”

The numerous Christian Service projects in which Catholic young men and women are engaged through their parishes or schools include:

- Catechist/teacher aides in Religious Education Programs
- Coaching students in parish elementary schools
- Assisting with after-school programs
- Team leaders on Kairos Retreats
- Youth Ministry Core Team Leaders
- Children’s Special Olympics
- Tutoring low-income students
- Summer camp volunteers
- Youth Empowerment Leadership Program
- Volunteer for Children with Special Needs.

Many of these service projects involve minors working with other minors, children and adolescents, bringing young people in close physical contact with younger children and youth. For example, volunteers assisting with Children’s Special Olympics may find it necessary to touch handicapped children as they guide them in an activity. Coaching little children may require demonstrating certain moves or play involving physical contact. Working with adolescents may test the patience of a young team leader and necessitate sensitivity to their changing moods and attitudes.

In today’s milieu which gives priority to safe environments, how are these young men and women being prepared to respect

appropriate boundaries when working with youngsters?

The Office of Religious Education and the Department of Catholic Schools, working in collaboration with the Office of Safeguard the Children, have developed Archdiocesan Boundary Guidelines for junior high and high school youth working or volunteering with children or youth. These Guidelines are comprehensive in that they delineate both what the student volunteers will do and the positive aspects of behavior, such as:

“As a student volunteer, I will:

- “Safeguard at all times children or other youth entrusted to my care.
- “Treat everyone with respect, loyalty, patience, integrity, courtesy and dignity.
- “Avoid situations where I am alone with a child/youth.
- “Maintain appropriate physical and emotional boundaries with the children and youth.
- “Cooperate fully in any investigation of abuse of children/youth.
- “Report suspected abuse to my supervisor or, if it involves my supervisor, report it to the principal or pastor at the location.”

And a student volunteer will not:

- Commit an illegal or immoral act.
- Verbally threaten or physically abuse anyone.
- Use profanity in the presence of children/youth.
- Touch a child/youth in a sexual, overly affectionate or other inappropriate manner.
- Tolerate inappropriate or bullying behavior by a child/youth towards another child/youth.

These Guidelines are promulgated to ensure the safety of the children in all Archdiocesan programs and Christian Service projects. All youth volunteers, including students who are already 18, must receive training in these Boundary Guidelines before undertaking their Christian Service ministry project. The young people sign the Code of Conduct form to verify that they understand their obligations and responsibilities.

“The Archdiocesan Boundary Guidelines for Junior High and High School Youth Working or Volunteering with Children or Youth” substantiates the commitment of the Archdiocese to establish safe environments in all parish programs for children and youth. The “Boundary Guidelines” can be accessed through the Archdiocesan web site: <http://www.archdiocese.la\protecting\policies/>, and clicking on the third bullet point.

This weekly series of feature stories, commentary and analysis is compiled and edited by an advisory group to the Media Relations Office of the Archdiocese, through which the articles are distributed.