

2-8-08 - Repeated attempts to petition U.S. Bishops fail
KANSAS CITY (MO), NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER, by Dennis Coday

The American Catholic reform group Call to Action is continuing its drive to pressure Lincoln, Neb., Bishop Fabian Bruskewitz to comply with the U.S. bishops' program for protecting children from sexual abuse.

Last year, the group circulated a petition calling for Bruskewitz to comply with audits of diocesan protection programs conducted by the U.S. bishops' National Review Board for the Protection of Children and Young People. The Chicago-based group gathered about 1,000 signatures on the petition, and since June it has been trying to deliver the petition to someone of authority in the Catholic church.

Last June, Call to Action members were threatened with arrest when they went to the Lincoln diocesan offices to deliver the petition to Bruskewitz.

In November, representatives of the group went to Washington while the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops was meeting. "We were promised that an official would meet with us, but nobody came," a statement from Call to Action said.

In January, the group wrote to Cardinal Francis George of Chicago, elected the bishops' conference president in November, asking him to take the petitions and "to bring Bishop Bruskewitz into compliance with the national charter .. in order to protect the youth of the Lincoln diocese."

At press time, George had not responded to the Call to Action letter.

"We'll likely be taking further action if we do not hear from Cardinal George by mid-February," Nicole Sotelo, director of communications for Call to Action, told NCR.

Michael Merz, chairman of the National Review Board, received a copy of Call to Action's letter to George. Merz told NCR Jan. 30 that he wrote to Call to Action "to thank them for supporting the charter and for again calling attention to the fact that we have one ordinary who not only won't follow the charter but is rather public about not following the charter."

"And I wished them success," said Merz, who is chief magistrate judge for the U.S. District Court in southern Ohio. He said he doesn't understand why Bruskewitz would not want to join a program that other bishops have found helpful and useful, especially "when it's a matter of protecting children."

"Cardinal George doesn't have any legal power," he said. "I pointed that out to them. Only the Holy See has the legal power to compel Bishop Bruskewitz to act in any particular way. But I have personally found Cardinal George to be a pretty persuasive guy and I would hope that that would work."

Bruskewitz has refused to allow National Review Board auditors to certify that the Lincoln diocese has implemented procedures -- such as safe environment programs for children and background checks for employees and volunteers -- that the bishops agreed to implement nationwide nearly six years ago.

The bishops also agreed to national standards for procedures to respond promptly to allegations of sexual abuse of minors, to report allegations to public authorities, to establish diocesan review boards to evaluate allegations, and to create programs to reach out to victims and their families.

Lincoln is the only diocese not to comply with the audits. "Three or four" Eastern Rite eparchies in the United States have not complied with the audits, according to the bishops' Office of Child & Youth Protection.

In various statements to the press over the last two years, Bruskewitz has maintained that diocesan audits are voluntary and he is within his rights as a bishop to refuse them.

He has noted that the diocese complied with the first audit in 2003, but found the process "flawed" and "not helpful."

In a statement sent to the Omaha World-Herald in June, Bruskewitz said his refusal to comply with the audits does not mean children in Lincoln are not protected. The diocese is "in complete compliance and obedience" to all civil and church laws for the protection of children, it said.

A June 29, 2007, article in Lincoln's diocesan newspaper details the diocese's child protection measures. According to this story, Lincoln's program differs from the national charter in at least three main points. Lincoln:

- Allows pastors to waive background checks for "longstanding employees."
- Has no "safe environment" programs for children.
- Does not agree to eschew settlements that include confidentiality agreements.