

Camp and Youth Worker Conference focuses on Child and Youth Protection

By Elisabeth Lourie

From January 22-24, eighty five Orthodox clergy, youth directors, youth workers, camp directors and camp staff from all over North America, from all different jurisdictions, attended the Inter Orthodox Camp and Youth Worker Conference in Ft. Lauderdale, FL. This year the conference was organized by the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America Department of Youth and Young Adult Ministries and was hosted by St. Demetrios Greek Orthodox Church in Ft. Lauderdale. For the first time the annual camp conference was opened up to youth workers as well for a special reason and with a specific theme: the protection of our Orthodox children and youth.

The Greek Orthodox Archdiocese has developed a Youth Protection Manual that is now being instituted at each camp in their Archdiocese. This manual has been created with the assistance of Praesidium Inc., a risk management organization that specializes in the protection of children and youth. The Youth Protection Manual (YPM) consists of policies and procedures for the protection of children and youth participating in camps and retreats. Praesidium has developed similar policies for the YMCA, Salvation Army, Catholic dioceses, and Lutheran Social Services. Each participant in the conference was provided with a copy of the YPM along with resources to help institute the new policies at their camp, diocese, retreat, etc.

Dr. Jane Hickerson, Vice-President of Praesidium, was present and led the training for the Conference. She provided specialized training in the following areas: recognizing child and sexual abuse; spotting child predators, monitoring and supervision of staff and volunteers, guidelines for appropriate affection, and the screening and selecting staff and volunteers. Additional workshops took place on how to properly institute the policy at the local camp/retreat level and an information session on social networking sites. Additionally, individual jurisdictional meetings took place, and there was also opportunity for recording with the Orthodox Christian Network, which is overseen by Fr. Chris Metropolis, parish priest at St. Demetrios.

The establishment of the new policies means some changes for each program and definitely may mean more work on the part of directors and camp staff. However, every one in attendance agreed that there is no greater priority than the protection and care of these youth who are entrusted into the care of the Church and its programs.

The conference also presented a chance for youth workers to compare notes on resources and issues they face. A pool side dessert reception offered a chance for socializing and networking between people from all over North America. Participants stayed at a beach side hotel and enjoyed the sun and fresh air, as well as the delicious food provided by the parishioners of St. Demetrios throughout the three days.

It was truly a beautiful sight to see people from all over North America, from all different jurisdictions, camps, retreats and programs come together to educate themselves on how to keep their children safe, happy, and spiritually fed. Each participant is now trained in the prevention of child sexual abuse and will be able to train their particular camp and retreat staff, taking that knowledge back to their own programs. Through the diligent work of these people who are so committed to our Orthodox youth, knowledgeable professionals, and the work of the Holy Spirit, God willing we will be able to keep our children safe and happy as Christ commanded.