

SPECIAL REPORT: LICENSED TO TEACH

Priests in sex-abuse cases keep their teaching certificates

Ohio licenses tracked through online research

By JIM PROVANCE; TOLEDO BLADE (OH) COLUMBUS BUREAU; Friday, October 6, 2006

First of two parts

COLUMBUS — The Vatican defrocked George J. Cooley, 58, in 1998, and he spent 18 months in prison for child molestation.

But the disgraced former Roman Catholic priest from Cincinnati still holds a certificate issued by the state of Ohio to teach in private and religious schools.

Stephen G. Rogers, 58, a former religion teacher and associate pastor at Toledo's Central Catholic High School, was convicted of possessing child pornography in 2003. He served 18 months of a 21-month federal prison sentence, is registered as a sex offender, and has been barred from public ministry by the Diocese of Toledo.

But he continues to hold a state-issued certificate to teach in private and religious schools.

Anyone using the Department of Education's online license search engine — including schools, nonprofit organizations, and potential employers inside and outside Ohio — would find no hint of anything amiss.

"The priest thing is a whole new twist for us. This is brand-new territory," said Adrian Allison, director of the Department of Education's Office of Professional Conduct and Education Licensure.

The Ohio Board of Education is set to permanently revoke Rogers' teaching certificate next week. The state has launched inquiries into the certificates of Cooley and eight others, including a nonpriest teacher and coach who is believed to be the only one on the list actively teaching at the K-12 level.

None was on the state's radar screen until brought to its attention by The Blade.

Rogers has agreed to voluntarily surrender his certificate. Two other priests suspended by the Diocese of Toledo — Robert J. Yeager and Joseph M. Schmelzer — have also decided not to contest the state's revocation of their teaching certificates at a future date, their attorney said.

Mr. Allison noted that a Catholic diocese may have conducted its own investigation of a priest or school employee, imposed its own discipline, and, in the case of the Diocese of Toledo and the Archdiocese of Cincinnati, published that information on their Web sites.

However, no complaints were lodged with the department in these cases, he said.

There are approximately 145,000 certified or licensed teachers in Ohio. Less than 1 percent of them have faced disciplinary action.

"It's not a widespread problem. But when it happens once, it's one time too often," department spokesman J.C. Benton said.

The department relies on public reports, state and national databases, and tips made via its toll-free line at 1-877-OHIOEDU.

Claudia Vercellotti, Toledo coordinator for the Survivors Network for those Abused by Priests, called the state's revocation of Rogers' certificate a "no-brainer."

"Anyone who would dare to prey upon a child has no business working with kids because of the recidivism rate," she said. "When Rogers got a job with Habitat for Humanity [after his release from prison], the Web site bragged that he had vast experience in education and ministry.

"They use their former credentials as a springboard to other positions that put them in close proximity to children," she said. "You can be 14 years old and volunteer for Habitat for Humanity."

Rogers quit his job as volunteer coordinator last year under pressure from Habitat for Humanity International after less than two months on the job. He now lives in a church-owned apartment at Toledo's Corpus Christi University Parish.

Each of the licensees in question appeared to fall through the cracks of existing law.

While applicants for teaching licenses are subject to criminal and sex-offender background checks when they first apply, the Department of Education does not have legal authority to conduct additional checks after licenses are issued or when they come up for renewal.