

New priest abuse policy doesn't go far enough, alleged victims say

By **PETER SMITH**
psmith@courier-journal.com
The Courier-Journal

DALLAS — Roman Catholic bishops began heading home yesterday from a historic conference, vowing to crack down on priests who sexually abuse children.

But some alleged victims of abuse in Kentucky don't think the bishops' new policy, which

doesn't automatically remove abusers from the priesthood and doesn't punish bishops who kept them on the job, will be sufficient.

Karen Mouser, one of more than 100 plaintiffs who allege in lawsuits they were abused in the Archdiocese of Louisville, said Bishop Wilton Gregory, the conference president, seemed "sympathetic and apologetic."

"But it's hard to believe them (the bishops) after everything they've done as far as hiding so much, and so much secrecy," Mouser, 50, said in an interview from her home in Nelson County.

But the Rev. Gary Hayes, who says he was molested by a New Jersey priest as a child and is now pastor of St. Rose Church in Cloverdale, Ky., called the bish-

ops' new policy a strong beginning.

"There's certainly not everything in there that survivors wanted, but it's still a good framework" for improvements, said Hayes, president of the national support group Survivors of Clergy Abuse Linkup, who was in

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The Rev. Gary Hayes, who says he was molested by a priest as a child, called the bishops' new policy a strong beginning, but said there needs to be a push for improvements.

Alleged victims call priest policy insufficient

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Dallas for the bishops' convention.

"A good thing is removing priests from the ministry," Hayes said of the policy. "What it doesn't say anything about is where do they go, who monitors them, who appoints the people who monitor them. They've removed priests before and they end up in another state or another country."

Hayes said survivors need to push for further improvements now that they have unprecedented access to bishops, who have pledged to consult with them.

"That's something we never had," he said. Until the scandal erupted this year, "we could barely get anybody to talk to us."

UNDER THE POLICY adopted on a 239-13 vote Friday by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, any priest who sexually abuses a child even once would be barred from public ministry — although the priest may be allowed to remain in the priesthood. Diocese will establish review boards of mostly lay people to advise a bishop on whether to recommend that a priest be defrocked. And, diocese must report allegations of abuse to civil authorities if the alleged victim is currently a child.

Most controversial with abuse victims and advocates is the fact that priests aren't automatically defrocked and that there are no sanctions for

bishops who allowed known abusers to stay in ministry.

Gerald Payne of Owensboro, who was in Dallas as a protester, said the bishops failed to enact real reform.

"Any bishop that knowingly re-assigned a pedophile should resign or be put in jail immediately," said Payne, 45, who at one point stood outside the convention hotel with a signing saying, "We are not your playthings. Reform."

Payne contended the new policy "still allows them to shuffle pedophile priests around."

While awaiting Vatican ratification, the bishops have agreed to begin enforcing the new policy.

That has implications in the Archdiocese of Louisville, where 130 lawsuits making allegations of past sexual abuse by clerics and a teacher have been filed. Many of the allegations involved incidents that occurred as long as five decades ago.

Lexington Bishop J. Kendrick Williams resigned last week after being accused in three lawsuits, stemming from his service as a priest in the Louisville archdiocese. He has denied the allegations of abuse. Two Louisville pastors have also resigned in the wake of accusations.

"We'll have to look at some of the old cases and see where we stand with those," Archbishop Thomas Kelly said Friday.

While the archdiocese's existing policies on abuse, adopted in

1993, called for setting up a panel of lay people to assess allegations, Kelly said that policy was structured to deal with accusations of recent incidents.

"We never got any new cases, we just got old cases" Kelly said. "We didn't know how exactly best to deal with them." Developing a panel that's equipped to deal with old cases will be "a big help," he said.

While much of the alleged abuse listed in the lawsuits against the archdiocese occurred before Kelly's arrival in 1982, the archbishop has had to make decisions on reassigning those accused of abuse.

In 1990, Kelly learned of an allegation against the Rev. Louis E. Miller and barred him from all ministry with children, though Miller has remained a priest, and he worked as a retirement-home chaplain until his own retirement this year.

More than 45 people have sued since April, alleging abuse by Miller from the 1950s to the 1980s. Miller has denied allegations of abuse.

MICHAEL TURNER of Prospect was the first person this year to name Miller in a lawsuit filed against the archdiocese.

In a phone interview, Turner, who lives in Prospect, said of the bishops' conference that he is "glad they admitted" their past failures. But he wished bishops would have pledged to do what they could to bring priests to justice.

"We have laws that say you can't abuse children," Turner said. "If you do, you go to jail."

He also wondered why the bishops were so long in making reforms.

"I can't see how it takes 10 years, that they couldn't come up with an absolute (rule) that they be thrown out of the ministry if they abused a child."

Payne, the Owensboro man in Dallas, said he doesn't believe the church can monitor someone removed from ministry 24 hours a day. The church should strip abusers of the title of priest so they cannot use that as a "tool" to make it easier to prey on children, he said.

He said he believes the bishops were only reacting to the massive public outrage of reports beginning in January that church leaders in Boston had knowingly given abusive priests new assignments, news that brought out a flood of other abuse allegations nationwide.

"I am all for society putting ethics in on the Catholic Church," Payne said. "Society is causing the church to reform."

The three-day meeting of 284 bishops in Dallas received unprecedented national media attention. Another unusual aspect of the meeting was the speed with which the new policy was put in place. Establishing new guidelines for the church often involve years of discussion and debate.

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