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Gay Pastor's History of Abuse Shocks a South Dakota City

By JOHN W. FOUNTAIN

RAPID CITY, S.D., May 8 — Though it was never meant to be a secret, the Metropolitan Community Church of the Black Hills, which serves a gay and lesbian congregation, existed in relative obscurity in this community of 60,000.

That is, until last week, when news broke that the church's pastor, the Rev. James A. Forsythe, was a former Roman Catholic priest who 13 years ago pleaded guilty to molesting a 15-year-old boy while an associate pastor of a parish in Kansas.

Mr. Forsythe's past was disclosed by The Kansas City Star, which reported that he had not registered as a sex offender with the police here, a misdemeanor punishable by up to a year in jail.

Capt. Christopher Grant of the Rapid City police said that Mr. Forsythe would not be charged and that the authorities believed his failure to register since his move here from Colorado in January 2000 had been an oversight. He registered this week.

But word that the 47-year-old Mr. Forsythe was a convicted child molester, and that national officials of his Protestant denomination as well as some members of the local congregation had been aware of his past, stunned many here.

To some extent, the very presence of a church serving gays and lesbians was a surprise to quite a few in this small conservative city. And while the past days have brought no visible sign of intolerance, some worry that the Forsythe episode could prove a springboard for it.

Cara Riker, who is 29, a lesbian and a divorced mother of three children, has lived in Rapid City for 12 years and, she said, has been able to do so for the most part worry-free.

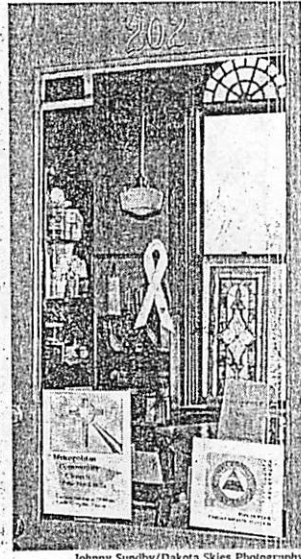
But Ms. Riker, who is not a member of Mr. Forsythe's church, said of the heightened public exposure of gays and lesbians: "I don't know if that's necessarily a good thing. It's the negativity and the backlash of being gay that's not going to be a good thing. I'm just afraid of the negativity for my children. There's always those negative people, who don't have open minds."

Mr. Forsythe's church is a member of the Metropolitan Community Churches, created in 1968 by a gay minister, the Rev. Troy D. Perry, as a denomination for gay and lesbian worshipers. The denomination, which is based in California, claims 46,000 followers among 300 congregations in 22 countries.

The Rapid City church was founded in 1996 and, the denomination's national officials say, has about two dozen members, none of them children. It is housed in a two-story downtown building, in a sunny second-floor office with hardwood floors, a podium and an altar table. Pamphlets about the AIDS virus were visible today through a window at the front door.

Contacted this week, both Mr. Forsythe and Charles White, an official of the local church, declined to comment. Last week Mr. Forsythe told The Kansas City Star: "I love the ministry, and I loved the priesthood. I thought I made a good priest. But I'm not called to be celibate. And for me to be in that environment was not healthy." He also said that while he had told officials of the local church about his past, he had not told the entire congregation.

His lawyer, Timothy J. Rensch, said Mr. Forsythe had been unaware



Johnny Sundby/Dakota Skies Photography, for The New York Times

The door to James Forsythe's church, housed in a sunny office.

until recently of the state requirement that he register with the local authorities as a sex offender. The disclosure of his past has caused Mr. Forsythe shame and worry, Mr. Rensch said.

"I know that he's embarrassed," the lawyer added. "I think somebody in his position would naturally be worried about what might happen. He was labeled pedophile, failing to register. One always worries about the depth of backlash you can get by virtue of that label."

The sexual abuse that Mr. Forsythe admitted to a judge in December 1989 occurred when he was a priest at Holy Cross Church in Overland Park, Kan., outside Kansas City. He pleaded guilty to one count of molestation and, said Tom Bath, the prosecutor who handled the case, spent 120 days in prison.

Later, in the early 1990's, Mr. Forsythe first became active at a Metropolitan Community Church, in Denver, and informed church officials there of his past, said Jim Birkitt, national spokesman for the denomination.

Mr. Birkitt said the Metropolitan Community Churches had a policy of "zero tolerance" for sexual abuse of children. But in addition to that early candor with church officials, Mr. Birkitt pointed out that Mr. Forsythe had served his time, undergone seven months of residential treatment after being released from prison and committed no offenses since.

"We've got 34 years of history of being a church of a second chance," Mr. Birkitt said, "and that's what it has been for Reverend Forsythe."

The Rev. Charles McGlenn, vicar general of the Kansas City Archdiocese, was another associate pastor at the Overland Park church when Mr. Forsythe was charged with sexual abuse. He remembers him as "an enjoyable person with a very outgoing personality" and as "a very kind and compassionate person."

"I have not seen Jamie since he left here, and I really don't know if he has rehabilitated or not," Father McGlenn said. "If he was a priest, we would not employ him in any pastoral capacity in the archdiocese. That's just our policy."

Victims' Group Uses Spotlight to Seek Changes in Law

By LAURIE GOODSTEIN

For more than 10 years, the Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests was little more than a loose support group of men and women who gathered in one another's homes to share tears, traumatic memories and legal advice.

Their stories rarely made it beyond their living rooms, and members say they grew used to being ignored or rebuffed by the Roman Catholic Church, the news media and in many cases even their friends and families.

All that changed when the sexual abuse scandal engulfed the church, giving the organization, known as SNAP, a news media platform it had never known. Now SNAP is trying to channel the attention and outrage into a lobbying effort to change the nation's laws on child sexual abuse.

In 21 cities in the United States and Canada yesterday, members of SNAP stood at the chancery doors of 21 Roman Catholic dioceses and urged bishops to push for legislation to make it harder for abusers to escape prosecution.

For years SNAP has looked to the bishops to stop abusive priests. Group members picketed churches and the hotels where the bishops held meetings. They petitioned for face-to-face sessions.

Now they are no longer looking to the church for the change, said Phil Saviano, director of SNAP's New England chapter. "We are putting our faith in the legislators and the prosecutors," Mr. Saviano said.

The group wants the bishops to join in lobbying for legislation to make it mandatory for clergy members to report suspected abuse. It also wants the bishops to help eliminate or extend statutes of limitations that in many states have protected the church and its priests from prosecution for abuses of years ago.

"It's time for action, not words," said Daniel Dugo, outside the chancery of the Archdiocese of Brooklyn. Mr. Dugo said he had been victimized by a priest at a church in Greenpoint. "If they are serious about protecting children then they should join us in this effort."

Standing in a light rain outside the gates of the Archdiocese of Washington, Lee White of Arlington, Va., said he had been sexually abused at 14 by his parish priest in Newport, R.I.

"The psychology of the abuse is such that the damage is not realized until later in life," Mr. White said. "In Rhode Island, the church lobbied against extending the statute of limitations for these cases. If they can lobby against it, they can lobby for it."

The nation's Catholic bishops are to meet in June in Dallas and are expected to try to hammer out a policy on child sexual abuse that all of them would be required to follow. Yesterday, SNAP said that until the laws could be changed, bishops should agree to "stop hiding behind" statutes of limitations and other laws that protect abusers, open their files on abusive priests to prosecutors and lift the confidentiality agreements silencing victims who have reached settlements with dioceses.

But some SNAP members said they had stopped expecting any significant progress from the bishops.

"A national policy would be helpful, but I don't have a lot of confidence that they're going to be able to reach a national policy any time soon, and who knows what the provisions will be and how effective they'll be," said Mr. Saviano, the SNAP organizer in New England. "Certainly the bishops have known this is a



Stephen Crowley/The New York Times

A group of abuse survivors, from left, Mark Vincent Serrano, Paul Stiedler, Richard Kirby, Lee White and Bridget Lyons, at a news conference yesterday at an Archdiocese of Washington office in Hyattsville, Md.

problem since 1985, and so many years have gone by and it seems that they're still grappling with the basic elements."

Last week, after meeting with SNAP members, Cardinal Francis E. George of Chicago said he would agree to support extending the statute of limitations on child sexual abuse cases if the change applied to all abusers, not just priests.

Yesterday, SNAP members tried to deliver letters at the 21 chancery offices asking the bishops to join Cardinal George in pushing for legal remedies. David Clohessy, SNAP's national director, said group members in St. Louis handed their letter directly to Archbishop Justin F. Rigali, who said he would consider the demands.

In Washington, SNAP members gave their letter to a receptionist because Cardinal Theodore E. McCarrick was out of town. In Worcester, Mass., the group presented its letter to the vicar who heads the pastoral care committee. In Brooklyn, the locked chancery

doors had a placard saying "Holy Day Closed." Yesterday was Ascension Day, which commemorates Jesus' return to heaven 40 days after his resurrection.

Until now, few priests accused of child abuse have been charged with crimes, often because the cases fell outside the statutes of limitations. Sylvia Demarest, a Dallas lawyer, said that among the 1,200 priests she says have been accused of sexual abuse against minors, only 120 have faced criminal charges, and fewer than 80 served time in prison.

The abuse scandal has already prompted some legislatures to close the legal loopholes that allow offenders to avoid prosecution.

The Connecticut Legislature passed a bill this week extending the statute of limitations on sexual abuse crimes against children. The bill would also outlaw confidential out-of-court settlements that forbid victims to speak to the police. But the State Senate struck down a provision that would have required clergy members to report accusations, because

some Catholic lawmakers said it would have obligated priests to violate the secrecy of the confessional.

In Massachusetts, however, the governor signed just such a mandatory reporting provision into law last week after four years of controversy. Nassau County in New York voted last week to require religious groups to report accusations of abuse to the authorities. In Albany, state legislators are considering doing the same.

Meanwhile, SNAP organizers, all volunteers, say their phone lines are jammed with calls from victims. The group has no office and no paid staff.

Mr. Saviano said he first contacted SNAP for help five years ago. Now he says he has no time for his job as a technical writer because he spends 10 hours a day on the phone with victims and the news media.

Last week's meeting of the New England chapter, at a library in Natick, Mass., drew 25 people, Mr. Saviano said. He said they were considering splitting the group. It has too many people, he said, to really serve as a support group for victims.

New Hampshire Bishop Insists He Won't Heed Calls to Resign

CONCORD, N.H., May 9 (AP) Bishop John B. McCormack said today that he would not step down, in the face of growing questions about his role in the sexual abuse scandal in the Roman Catholic Church.

"Even though some think I should step aside, Pope John Paul II appointed me to be your shepherd," Bishop McCormack said. "I will remain your servant and toil ceaselessly on your behalf as bishop of Manchester."

Some New Hampshire Catholics say the bishop has not been forthcoming enough about accusations that he ignored warnings about abusive priests and helped shuffle them to new parishes when he was a top church official in Boston. A petition drive calling for his resignation has been circulating through some of the state's churches, and on Wednesday, The

Union Leader called for his resignation in a front-page editorial.

"The Diocese of Manchester now needs leadership that has not been tarnished by this scandal," the editorial said. "In the best interest of all, he should step aside."

Bishop McCormack, 66, worked for the Boston Archdiocese from 1984 to 1994 and handled sexual abuse complaints against priests for Cardinal Bernard F. Law for several years. Cardinal Law is expected to resume a deposition Friday in a lawsuit by 86 people who say they were molested by one of those priests, John J. Geoghan.

A lawyer for another, the Rev. Paul R. Shanley, asked a judge today to lower his \$750,000 bail, describing prosecutors' suggestions that he would flee as an "absolute fiction."

Father Shanley was arrested in San Diego last week and returned



Bob LaPree/Union Leader, via Associated Press

Bishop John B. McCormack of the Manchester, N.H., Diocese.

to Massachusetts on Monday. His lawyer, Frank Mondano, said the court should consider fitting Father Shanley with an electronic monitoring bracelet.