

Ex 102
ALL-STATE LEGAL

ST. PAUL PIONEER PRESS 10/30/98

Church updates sex abuse policy

Official: 15 archdiocesan priests in last 50 years have been 'credibly accused' of molesting minors

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In 1984, the Rev. Kevin McDonough sat in on a meeting at the chancery in St. Paul between church leaders and a distraught family whose son had been sexually abused by a Catholic priest years before. It was the young McDonough's

introduction to the problem of sexual misconduct by clergy, which was to consume the Roman Catholic Church locally and nationally for the next decade.

Over the years, the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis has been hit with nearly 40 sex exploitation lawsuits and paid \$400,000 in settlements, said spokesman Tim Anderson. Insurance pay-

ments covered another \$1 million in settlements.

It also developed one of the first policies in the country to prevent abuse and respond compassionately to victims' complaints.

This week, the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis released a revised version of that policy. There are few changes. But it indicates that church officials are keeping the issue before their flock.

"We think we responded fairly well to the crisis," said McDonough, vicar gener-

al of the archdiocese. "Now what we want to do is stay out in front of the issue and not sit back and cross our fingers and hope that nothing happens."

For the first time, McDonough revealed the extent of the problem in an interview this week. Fifteen priests in the archdiocese have been "credibly accused" of molesting minors during the past 50 years, McDonough said.

The number is higher than the national average, McDonough said, but courts

CHURCH/Archdiocese paid \$400,000 in sex abuse lawsuits

▼ CONTINUED FROM 1D

sponds to experts' predictions that about 2 percent of priests abuse children. Fifty priests in the archdiocese have been "credibly accused" of a sexually exploiting another adult, McDonough said.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, Minnesota was the scene of a series of high-profile cases alleging sex abuse by priests. Church officials were criticized for ignoring allegations and moving offending priests from parish to parish. Under the leadership of former Archbishop John Roach, the archdiocese responded in 1988 by writing the country's first policy to deal with priests and the sexual abuse of children. In 1992, guidelines were expanded to include exploitation of adults and to cover any ministry employee in the archdiocese, ordained or not.

The new 17-page document, "A Time to Heal: Preventing and Responding to Ministry-Related Sexual Misconduct," reiterates these policies and tightens training requirements. It was released to priests Thursday and will be published today in the archdiocesan newspaper, the Catholic Spirit, which goes to 87,000 homes. For the first time, brochures explaining how to make a complaint will be made available in every parish.

Gary Schoener, a Minneapolis psychotherapist who has consulted in more than 3,000 sexual misconduct cases, said the archdiocese's

efforts to publicize its policy is commendable.

"My own view is that the archdiocese track record here is as good as it gets, and they have done a better job than anyone I have seen across the country. And I'm consulted by a number of other dioceses," said Schoener. "Nationally, I don't think the Catholic Church has done a good job at all."

Even the local policy has drawn fire.

"The archdiocese can write and say all these wonderful things, but I judge them by their actions," said Jeffrey Anderson, a St. Paul attorney who has filed hundreds of sex misconduct lawsuits against Catholic dioceses nationwide. "Part of justice is reparation, and when it comes to payment of money, they just don't care. When a victim comes forward, they continue to hire an army of lawyers and advisers to brutalize and revictimize the victim in court."

Although victims can approach the archbishop or vicar general directly, the new guidelines suggest they first contact Phyllis Wilerscheidt, coordinator of victim advocates. If the complaint involves a minor or vulnerable adult, it is turned over to police.

Otherwise, the archdiocese starts an investigation that may include interviewing witnesses and the victim. In one case, the archdiocese hired a private investigator to follow a priest who denied hav-

ing an affair with a woman in his parish. He was caught and later resigned, McDonough said.

For the past three years, cases have been reviewed by a panel, which includes three clergy and six lay people. The panel makes a recommendation to the archbishop about a long-term solution.

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with children, McDonough said. Four of the 15 priests who sexually molested children still work for the archdiocese in administrative capacities, he said.

Priests who exploited adults may return to a parish if they undergo therapy, but their ministry is often restricted. For example, a priest may be prohibited from one-on-one counseling. The parish council and staff are always informed of misconduct, McDonough said.

"In a case when an individual appears to have faced the underlying causalities, is genuinely sorry,

where the victims are comfortable with this, and where there is disclosure, then we will put a person with specific skills back to work," said McDonough. "But that is a lot of hoops to go through."

McDonough believes that most cases involving abuse of children have been heard. But he still thinks there are people who were exploited as adults who have not come forward.

That's because experts estimate that about 10 percent of people in helping professions, such as physicians, psychologists and clergy, have inappropriate sexual contact with the people they serve. Allegations of adult exploitation in the archdiocese have identified about 4 percent of the archdiocese's 520 priests.

"We're very concerned I think we're actually more concerned than our people to tell you the truth, about adult-to-adult interaction," said McDonough. "When I go to parishes to tell them that we are removing their priest because of involvement with an adult parishioner, the reaction is often something like, 'Well, thank God it was a woman and not a child.' Well, our reaction is that any time we misuse our position to harm another, that is a very fundamental violation of the integrity of what we're about. It's just wrong."

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