

5-30-08 - Conference examines how clergy abuse is handled by dioceses worldwide

By Dennis Sadowski, Catholic News Service (DC)

WASHINGTON (CNS) -- Father Joe Mathias sat and listened, scribbling notes at times, paying careful attention to Teresa Kettelkamp, executive director of the U.S. bishops' Office of Child and Youth Protection.

Kettelkamp was talking about the latest efforts by dioceses across the country to protect children from abuse. For the Jesuit priest from India, it was an education.

As the Indian Catholic Church's lone representative at Anglophone Conference 2008 May 27-30, Father Mathias took in all he could during the gathering of 40 church representatives from English-speaking countries who handle allegations of child sexual abuse and oversee child protection programs in their home dioceses.

Afterward, Father Mathias, secretary of the Commission for Clergy and Religious for the Catholic Bishops Conference of India, didn't hesitate when asked where the Indian church stood in responding to abuse. "Stage zero," he told Catholic News Service.

Father Mathias knows that when he returns to New Delhi he will be the go-to man as the Indian bishops put together their own system to report abuse and to protect children.

"One thing that has impressed me is the commitment and seriousness of the participants," Father Mathias said. "They have done their homework well."

He said what he learned at the conference will help as the bishops also prepare a plan to educate the broader community about child sexual abuse. A recent survey of 12,000 children between 5 and 12 years old by the Indian Ministry of Child and Women Welfare found that nearly half had reported being abused, he said.

Those who joined the Anglophone Conference at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' headquarters came from countries with vast experience in dealing with abuse issues -- the United States, the United Kingdom, Ireland and Australia -- and developing countries where the topic of sexual abuse is taboo, such as India, Zimbabwe, South Africa and Papua New Guinea.

In his report to the conference, Jesuit Father Michael Lewis, coordinator of the Professional Conduct Committee of the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference, said cultural traditions that prevent people from discussing sexual abuse lead to the underreporting of abuse cases, even when clergy is involved.

Later he told CNS that sexual abuse by clergy is rare in Botswana, Swaziland and South Africa, the countries that make up the Southern African conference, saying there were about 60 reported cases during the last 14 years. In most cases, he said, abuse has occurred between adults with very few cases involving children.

Even when abuse comes to light, incidents are more likely to be handled by a tribal chief or local community leaders rather than by the courts, he explained. In such cases, it's the accused and his family who must deal with shame and the loss of respect within the community.

"This has never been challenged in a South African court of law and it is very unlikely to be challenged," he said.

Overall, the conference gave all the participants a chance to compare notes, to see what has worked and what has not, and to learn about new ways to protect children, not just from sexual abuse, but also from the violence of pornography, exploitation, physical abuse and human trafficking.

Bishop Gregory M. Aymond of Austin, Texas, chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on the Protection of Children and Young People, said the annual gathering helps even those countries where sophisticated abuse programs are in place.

"We are able to share best practices, able to communicate with one another the unanswered questions," Bishop Aymond told CNS.

"This conference is very important because for those of us who are moving forward and sometimes on the cutting edge of asking these questions and because we have been very wounded by the questions, we can be of support to one another. We can begin to look speculatively at the questions that really have no answers yet," he explained.

Archbishop Philip E. Wilson of Adelaide, Australia, president of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, called the gathering a time of renewal. "Dealing with the realities of these sorts of things are really quite deadening and worrying," he said in an interview.

The six-member delegation from Scotland, which sent along a 70-page report detailing its activities during the last year, left knowing the church is moving forward in minimizing abuse incidents.

"We feel comfortable and confident about what we're doing," said Jack McCaig, national coordinator for the protection of children and vulnerable adults for the Roman Catholic Bishops' Conference of Scotland. "We certainly feel we have a tremendous amount to contribute, and we're not really finished. We've got a lot more work to go."

The conference included presentations by:

-- Conventual Franciscan Father Paul Lininger, executive director of the Conference of Major Superiors of Men, on how the organization developed an accreditation program related to standards to prevent sexual abuse.

-- Michelle Collins, executive director of Exploited Children Services at the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children in Alexandria, Va., who explained how investigators track down abusers who peddle Internet violence against children.

-- Monica Applewhite, a Texas-based researcher who assists organizations in developing best-practice standards, examined ways of monitoring accused clergy.

-- Msgr. Stephen Rossetti, president and CEO of St. Luke Institute, an assessment and treatment program in Silver Spring, Md.

-- Margaret Leland Smith, quantitative criminologist and senior researcher at the Institute for Criminal Justice at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York who was the data analyst for a study commissioned by the U.S. bishops on the causes and context of clergy sex abuse in this country. The study is set for completion in 2009.