

Lori keeps quiet on abuse issue before bishops conference

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STAMFORD -- Bishop William Lori of the Bridgeport Diocese is keeping his stance on diocesan sex abuse audits under wraps until he arrives tomorrow at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' semiannual meeting in Colorado.

Lori, a member of the USCCB's Ad Hoc Committee on Sexual Abuse, declined interviews in the days leading up to the six-day conference, where a second round of audits is expected to be discussed.

"The bishop would prefer not to comment," said his spokesman, Joseph McAleer. "These are important matters, important issues to be discussed in assembly with brother bishops. The appropriate time to do that is not in advance, but during the meeting itself."

Last year, 90 percent of the 191 dioceses audited nationwide, including Bridgeport, were found to be in compliance with the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, the policy drafted by U.S. bishops at their historic Dallas conference during the height of the sex abuse scandals in June 2002.

The audits helped fulfill a requirement in the charter that requires the USCCB's Office of Child and Youth Protection to produce an annual report with the names of every diocese not in compliance.

The audits looked at diocesan policies on the sexual abuse of minors, their responses to allegations made, their methods of prevention including safe environment programs and their outreach to victims.

In their report, the auditors recommended the process be continued this year. They said the Office of Child and Youth Protection should track the number of allegations of abuse reported this year as well as any discipline taken against an admitted or proven child molester, the number of victims and the financial costs.

If audits are not done annually, some question how the Office of Child and Youth Protection could produce a meaningful annual report.

Bob Mulligan of Norwalk, a founding member of the Fairfield County chapter of Voice of the Faithful -- a national group founded by Catholics unhappy with the church's handling of the sex abuse crisis -- said bishops have no choice but to continue the audits annually "or their credibility is going to be zilch."

"I think they realize that they really have to go ahead," Mulligan said. "They are in an unfortunate situation. They have had a lot of bad press."

Edward Wilson, regional coordinator for the VOTF chapter in the Brooklyn, N.Y., Diocese, also said the audits should be continued.

"How you are going to have those reports without the audits is beyond me," he said. "Everybody assumed those reports are going to be continued."

Wilson said he is hopeful there will be a second round of audits because influential church leaders such as Cardinal Roger Mahony of Los Angeles and Cardinal Francis George, archbishop of Chicago, have spoken in favor of continuing them.

"I am hopeful they will do the right thing," Wilson said.

In addition to the debate over audits, Catholic News Service recently reported the bishops might begin preliminary discussions about softening their one-strike-and-you're out policy for child abusers.

The charter, drafted in June 2002, requires the policy be reviewed this year by the bishops.

But is unclear how much the public will learn of the business conducted at this week's meeting.

Unlike past USCCB conferences, this week's meeting is closed to the media.

The organization released a statement earlier this month that said: "The June meeting will not be attended by the observers usually present at the USCCB business meetings. Also there will be no credentialing of media, since, as with previous special assemblies, there will not be any coverage of its sessions by the media, no press briefings or news conferences outside the sessions, and no interview opportunities provided with individual bishops."

The meeting is a special assembly for prayer and reflection and only a small portion will be devoted to church business, officials said.

Wilson said he is disappointed interested Catholics cannot attend the conference.

"Why are they meeting in secrecy? What ever happened to transparency?" he asked.

While there are no plans for Lori to hold a press conference during the meeting, McAleer said the bishop plans to report back to his flock afterward.

"I'm confident that he'll share with the Catholic faithful of Fairfield County the news of the meeting and how it will affect Fairfield County," he said.

McAleer said there are no specific plans for how the bishop will make his report, though it is likely to be through his weekly radio show or the diocesan newspaper, The Fairfield County Catholic.

Hartford Archbishop Henry Mansell also is scheduled to attend this week's meeting. What he will contribute to the discussion is unclear.

"I think we just have to wait and find out," said his spokesman, the Rev. John Gatzak, saying Mansell has not made his thoughts on the audits known.

"It's a good time for the entire Catholic community to pray for their bishops," Gatzak said. "Typically we ask our bishops to pray for us, but prayer is one of those things that works both ways and there's not one of us that doesn't need prayers."

A spokesman for Norwich Bishop Michael Cote did not respond to a phone call seeking comment.