

Interim head of review board sees more cooperation with bishops

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WASHINGTON (CNS) -- The outgoing interim chairwoman of the bishops' National Review Board said that she expects more collaboration between the lay board and the bishops now that the board has demonstrated its independence.

Another aid to cooperation is that the board has shown the high quality of its work in helping the bishops implement policies to prevent clergy sex abuse of minors, said Justice Anne M. Burke.

Increased collaboration should overcome antagonisms with some bishops, she said.

"These animosities shouldn't have happened. We are trying to overcome that now," she said.

Burke, an Illinois Appellate Court judge, spoke to Catholic News Service June 29 by telephone from her Chicago office after the review board met June 27-28 to plan future activities.

Because the board was appointed by the president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, "we worked hard at autonomy" from the hierarchy to establish credibility, she said.

Initially, the board needed a wall between it and the hierarchy "to avoid the view that we are a rubber stamp for the bishops," said Burke.

"This put us in an adversary position with some bishops," she said without mentioning names.

"The bishops gave up control of some aspects of this (sex abuse) crisis to us. Some bishops didn't seem to realize this," she added.

"The board will remain independent but be more collaborative," she said.

Burke said that in a June 11 letter to her Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, head of the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, praised the work done by the board as an example of lay cooperation with the bishops.

The cardinal's letter came in response to her offer for board members to hold a second meeting with the cardinal to discuss the U.S. situation, she said.

The doctrinal congregation has overall church authority in clergy sex abuse cases.

She quoted the cardinal's letter as saying:

"Your offer is most generous and is also appreciated, especially in light of our conviction regarding the benefit to be derived from a close collaboration between bishops and the lay faithful on issues such as those dealt with in the National Review Board's two reports."

The two reports were a statistical study on the nature and scope of the crisis and a report on some of the possible reasons behind the scandal.

At its June 27-28 meeting, the review board discussed future activities such as the planned study on the "causes and context" of the crisis, Burke said.

The study will include an in-depth look at "what was the nature of the environment that allowed victims and perpetrators to come together," said Burke.

She estimated that the study would take three to four years and involve interviews with numerous victims and perpetrators as well as control groups such as priests not guilty of abusing children.

The board is working with the bishops' Ad Hoc Committee on Sexual Abuse to have a detailed proposal for the study ready in September so that qualified research centers can bid to do the report, she said.

Burke estimated the study would cost about \$4 million and said the board is looking for outside funding so the bishops would not have to carry the full cost.

The study also aims to inform the general public about child sex abuse which Burke called "a public health crisis" and "not just a Catholic Church problem."

Burke said that controversies earlier this year with some bishops over a second national audit of dioceses to monitor compliance with prevention policies resulted from miscommunication among the bishops.

"A vocal minority were pushing the envelope" for no further audits while the majority assumed there would be a second audit, said Burke.

At the bishops' June 14-19 meeting, they voted overwhelmingly to have a second audit in 2004. Burke said the audits, conducted by the bishops' Office of Child and Youth Protection, should be finished before the end of the year and a report published next February.

The 2003 audit showed that 90 percent of U.S. dioceses and Eastern-rite eparchies were in compliance with the policies.

Burke said a national audit also will be done in 2005.

The youth protection office also plans to establish standards so that future audits can be done by regional groups of bishops, she said.

Mercy Sister Mary Ann Walsh, USCCB spokeswoman, said the bishops decided in June to continue national audits until a method is developed to do regional ones.

Burke said that she and three other members of the board whose terms expire June 30 have agreed to remain until replacements have been named. She said that the review board and the bishops' Ad Hoc Committee on Sexual Abuse have drafted a list of possible replacements.

Members are chosen by the USCCB president, who currently is Bishop Wilton D. Gregory of Belleville, Ill.

Previously, Sister Walsh said that Bishop Gregory would present the names to the bishops' Administrative Committee in September for consultation before he appoints replacements.

Burke said that the board also is drafting suggestions along with the ad hoc committee for the bishops' review of their policies at their November meeting.