

July 22, 2007 - NV Retired bishop backed priests' shelter
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Reno's former Roman Catholic bishop, Phillip Straling, supported building a facility for priests accused of molesting children when he was bishop in San Bernardino, Calif., and used some of the priests held there to work in his diocese, according to testimony from a priest who led the group that ran the center.

The Rev. Joseph McNamara revealed Straling's involvement in the creation of the Servants of the Paraclete facility in Cherry Valley, Calif., during his June 21 testimony in the massive legal case against Los Angeles-area priests accused of sexually abusing children.

The Diocese of Los Angeles settled that case last week for a record \$660 million.

The Southern California facility, built in Straling's San Bernardino diocese in 1980, was used as "a clerical prison for holding known child sex offenders from all over the country instead of turning them over to the police," said Patrick Wall, a consultant with a Southern California law firm handling hundreds of cases against priests.

When consulted by McNamara on setting up the center, Straling gave his approval of the plan and saw it as a way to bring in new priests to help with his short-staffed diocese, the testimony showed.

Straling declined to comment on the priest's testimony, and said he had been advised by lawyers for the Diocese of San Bernardino against talking about any pending lawsuits, said Brother Matthew Cunningham, spokesman for the Diocese of Reno. Straling is a witness in some San Bernardino cases.

Straling instead referred questions to the Rev. Howard Lincoln, spokesman for the San Bernardino diocese. Lincoln said McNamara's statements were generally true.

"Bishop Straling supported their work and their mission of helping troubled individuals," Lincoln said of the Servants of the Paraclete.

"We did use members (priests who worked at the facility) as supply priests," Lincoln said. "We also used guests who had been placed in Cherry Valley as a sort of 'halfway house' for alcoholism.

"We have no records to indicate that we utilized guests as supply priests who had been placed with the Paracletes for issues of sexual abuse," he said.

The Paracletes reached a peak of having about 23 centers in the 1970s to 1990s that catered to priests who had problems with alcoholism or sexual activity, including the sexual abuse of children, Wall said. Most centers were closed because of a sex-abuse scandal and only three facilities still are operating -- one, located in Minnesota, in the U.S., Wall said.

The centers were the subject of growing criticism as being used to protect abusive priests. When priests were sent to a center, "they weren't reported for their suspected criminal activities and no warnings were given to the communities," said Dr. Gilbert Kliman, the medical director of the San Francisco-based Children's Psychological Health Center and an expert witness in the L.A. lawsuits.

"The priests were often referred back to the same people who had referred them there, and many priests returned to ordinary duties, including contact with children," he said.

Straling, who retired unexpectedly in 2005, was not named in the Los Angeles suits, but is a key witness in about 170 lawsuits in San Bernardino and San Diego filed against priests accused of molesting children. In some cases, Straling is accused of negligence for failing to stop the abuse.

The former bishop was called in to testify on those cases in December. His deposition has remained sealed while the bankruptcy case filed by the San Bernardino diocese is considered by the courts.

Straling also came under fire in late 2005 from several Reno residents who said they were abused by priests in the Reno diocese. One woman, who accepted a \$50,000 settlement from the Reno diocese for abuse she said she suffered by the Rev. David Brusky, said Straling lied to her about Brusky's condition and led her to believe he had suffered a stroke and was incapacitated.

But a visit by the Reno Gazette-Journal revealed that he was healthy and able to move around his Milwaukee assisted-living home.

The woman and several others had said at the time that they were considering filing a new lawsuit against the diocese for this and other cases, but none has been filed. The woman said last week that a new lawsuit was unlikely at this point, given the cost and stress of such legal action.

Retreat for problem priests

After working as a priest in San Diego, Straling was appointed as the first bishop of the newly established San Bernardino diocese in 1978, and became the Reno bishop in 1995.

According to the lawyers in the San Bernardino and San Diego cases, Straling lived and worked with priests who were later accused of abusing children, but did not report the abuse to authorities. Straling has denied any knowledge of abuse.

When the San Bernardino diocese was established, more than a dozen priests who were later accused or charged with molesting children worked there, and Straling had made many of these priests officials in his diocese.

It was during the early years as the new bishop in San Bernardino that McNamara sought approval from Straling for the Servants of the Paraclete problem-priest facility in Cherry Valley.

According to letters between the leader of the Servants of the Paraclete and various dioceses at that time, their mission was to create a "retreat for priests with problems." They sought financial support from Catholic leaders across the country to help them "provide shelter for the sick whether their ills stem primarily from the soul or from the body," according to the letters obtained through the Los Angeles litigation.

Some of the cases included priests who "have been addicted to abnormal practices, especially sins with the young." One priest who was sent to a Paraclete center from a church in New Hampshire did not have a drinking problem, the bishop told the servants, but had been involved in "a series of scandal-causing escapades with young girls."

The bishop wrote to the head of the servant facility in Jemez Springs, New Mexico, asking to send the priest to a new location: "The solution of his problem seems to be a fresh start in some diocese where he is not known."

Some of the priests who became "guests" at servant facilities were used by the local diocese to help out with the needs of the churches, McNamara said in an affidavit given in November 1993.

The mental-health experts at the facility said segregating the priests with "psychosexual difficulties" from others "would be counterproductive to rehabilitation." They recommended that the priests work as "supply ministry" to the local diocese, McNamara said.

Straling was interested in that possibility when the Cherry Valley facility was proposed, McNamara said.

New center

In his deposition for the Los Angeles lawsuits, McNamara said the archbishop of Los Angeles at the time, Cardinal Timothy Manning, wanted to use the services of the Servants of the Paraclete for his priests. Manning retired in 1985, and was followed by Cardinal Roger M. Mahony.

Manning actually toured the Paraclete's New Mexico center to see how it was operated, McNamara said.

The lawyer questioning McNamara asked whether Manning knew why the priests were sent there, and he said Manning, like every bishop in the country, was “aware of priests who had — had not lived up to their expectations, or — or priests who had simply kind of given up.”

Following that tour, Manning discussed opening a facility in the Los Angeles area with the head of the servants at the time, McNamara said.

McNamara said the Rev. Gerald Fitzgerald, the leader of the Paracletes at the time, sent him to speak with Bishop Straling. He met Straling at the diocese and discussed establishing a center within the San Bernardino diocese, McNamara said. McNamara said he wanted to see whether Straling would be open to such a facility.

“And what was his response?” the lawyer asked.

“He seemed favorable — favorable to it because — well, he had his own reasons, but he seemed favorable to it,” McNamara said.

McNamara said Straling’s diocese was short-staffed, and the bishop hoped the new Cherry Valley facility would bring new priests to the region to help with the diocese.

“Now, was he, if you know, considering members or guests or just members” to work for him, the lawyer asked. The members were the priests who worked at the facility and the guests were the problem priests sent there.

“I think he was considering both,” McNamara said.

The lawyer asked what happened after talking with Straling, and McNamara said they took it as the green light to go ahead and purchased property in Cherry Valley for the facility.

He asked whether the servants spoke with any other Catholic leaders in Southern California about the inception of the Cherry Valley facility, and he said, “No. Just with Bishop Straling.”

“And did, in fact — once the Cherry Valley facility was opened, did it serve his purpose of providing some additional priests to help in his diocese?” the lawyer asked.

“Yes,” he replied, adding that both members and guests were utilized.

“What kind of work are we talking about,” the lawyer asked.

“Mostly a weekend ministry, helping out on, say, Mass on the weekends, or when they happened to be on retreat and they needed priests to fill in, we would be there,” McNamara said.