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Pain, Outrage Mark Clergy Abuse Victims

Albany-- Ex-Judge Listens to Congregants' Accounts As He Devises Plan to Aid Those Injured in Scandal

By Michele Morgan Bolton
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Retired Court of Appeals Judge Howard Levine gained a new insight on devastation over the past four months after meeting with victims of clergy sex abuse and the therapists who counsel them.

The emotional and physical effects are indescribable, said Levine, who was appointed by Bishop Howard Hubbard in December to create a support program for victims. "Many are hurting, too, because they've also lost their faith."

Levine is working on the plan that seeks to make amends -- spiritually, psychologically and financially -- to those who were sexually abused by priests in the Roman Catholic Diocese of Albany.

"We're beginning to see daylight," he said of the approach -- to be presented to Hubbard in June -- that will be fair and open. "We want a fresh start."

Levine, who retired from the state Court of Appeals last year, is senior counsel at the Albany firm of Whiteman Osterman & Hanna. He also is a former state Supreme Court justice, Schenectady County Family Court judge and Schenectady County district attorney.

His proposal, if adopted by the diocese, would be voluntary.

"We're eager to see the results of his efforts," diocesan spokesman Kenneth Goldfarb said. "We continue to want to see what can be done to assist these people who have suffered under the current circumstances."

Some victims and their advocates expressed little faith that the program, whatever it entails, will be of much help.

"At the end of the day, it's really too little, too late," said Mark Furnish, who is director of the Capital District chapter of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests.

The process is going too slow, he said: "It's time for the diocese to step aside and let law enforcement take over. It's beginning to look like a lot of window dressing."

National SNAP director David Clohessy said many Catholic dioceses around the country have done nothing. Some have created programs focused on what they can afford rather than what is needed, he said.

In Boston, where the scandal erupted four years ago and resulted in Cardinal Bernard Law being replaced, church officials last week sold \$90 million worth of church property to Boston College to raise the funds needed to pay a settlement with victims.

Some dioceses claim to routinely offer therapy, but it's often hard to qualify for or the conditions are restrictive, Clohessy said. Some victims must sign lengthy documents swearing not to sue once benefits are received, he said, adding: "I don't think that when Jesus was approached by the blind

man he said, 'I'll help you, but first would you mind signing this 18-page contract?' "

Curtis Oathout, 40, is a Columbia County man who first spoke out in January 2003 of his longtime abuse as a young adolescent by the Rev. David Bentley and other priests.

The Albany diocese paid Oathout several hundred thousand dollars and met with him repeatedly in sessions he tape-recorded. But he said more is needed.

"Where are the laws that protect victims ... the tenderness and the caring?" he asked. "Where is the Legislature? They know who we are."

New York lawmakers continue to be stalled on a measure that would add the clergy to the list of those required to report cases of child sexual abuse to law enforcement. Delays have been caused by a debate over the time frame for reports -- whether they should be limited to the statute of limitations, or go as far back as 20 to 50 years.

Sexual victimization at the hands of a priest leaves lifelong scars, Oathout said: "Why haven't they brought us in for a memorial for victims? If they wanted to, they could have done something, anything long ago."

"My life is half done," Oathout said. "And they have stood their ground. These are crimes. And these men belong in shackles."

In Mendham, N.J., survivors of clergy sex abuse gathered Saturday as the nation's first memorial to such victims -- and created by them -- was dedicated.

Randy Sweringen, 38, of Berkeley, Calif., said that he hasn't received money from the diocese, nor has he asked for any beyond reimbursement for years of therapy costs.

Sweringen was in town last week to meet with Hubbard, who gave a personal apology for the sexual transgressions of the Rev. Charles Celeste, a chaplain at the RPI fraternity where Sweringen lived as a student in his late teens and early 20s in the 1980s.

"I would be immediately skeptical of a policy where victims had to go get something from anyone with ties to this diocese," he said of any plan that would limit therapy and other services to those provided by the church. "Imagine the pain of putting your mind, heart and soul in such a vulnerable place.

Sweringen said his trip last week was about an apology.

"The next trip will be about how we can come to make amends and how they can change their ways in the future," he said.

Celeste took a leave from his post as pastor at Holy Family parish in Little Falls in November 2003 after admitting he had sexual relations with Sweringen and another male.

Sweringen has asked the diocese to publish information about Celeste's admitted abuse in The Evangelist newspaper and notify every school, fraternity, hospital, prison and church of the priest's admissions.