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## **Hospital Ousted Priest with History of Abuse;**

Albany Diocese Posted Chaplain in '90; His Past Wasn't Known until '96

By Andrew Tilghman  
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The Roman Catholic Diocese of Albany acknowledged Tuesday that a longtime Capital Region priest with a history of sexually abusing boys was assigned to Glens Falls Hospital, a disclosure that highlights the church's quiet -- and now mostly discontinued -- practice of posting problem priests to hospital ministries.

It was the first time the church acknowledged the Rev. Mark Haight's history of sexual abuse and two confidential settlement agreements that the diocese entered into with his victims. Haight's case also marks the fourth instance that the diocese said it had assigned a priest to a hospital ministry after he underwent counseling for sexual misconduct.

A Schenectady native ordained in 1976 who served in parishes throughout the Capital Region, Haight was an assistant pastor at St. Joseph's Church in Scotia in 1989 when the first complaint against him was lodged, the Rev. Kenneth Doyle, a diocese spokesman, told the Times Union Tuesday.

The church later settled with Haight's accuser and sent the priest to a residential treatment program for pedophiles. Church officials allowed Haight to return to a "limited form of ministry" in 1990, when he was posted as a chaplain at Glens Falls Hospital, Doyle said.

"This is a very supervised setting. You are visiting patients in their rooms, with nurses and staff on the floor, in and out all the time," Doyle said about priests' hospital placement. "It was not a policy, although evaluating psychologists at therapeutic institutions regarded it as a safe environment."

While there has been no formal revision of policy, Doyle said the church is unlikely to assign to local hospitals priests accused of sexually abusing children.

"I think, in the past, we would have tended to accept the judgment of psychologists who recommended (a hospital ministry)," Doyle said. "But I think that a recommendation now for something like that would be treated very dubiously."

Glens Falls Hospital administrators were unaware of Haight's history until 1996 when an anonymous caller contacted them with allegations against Haight that had occurred years before he worked at the hospital.

When church officials confirmed Haight's history of sexual abuse, the hospital "made arrangements for Haight to discontinue his presence at Glens Falls Hospital," said Jayson White, a hospital spokesman.

The diocese and hospital came to a mutual agreement to remove Haight, who was employed by the church, Doyle said.

Early the next year, the church entered into a second settlement agreement with another victim and removed Haight from active ministry, Doyle said. Doyle declined to discuss details of the cases, including any money paid to settle them, other than to say both men were adults when they came forward with allegations of abuse that took place years before.

Doyle has said previously that, during the past 25 years, accusations of sexual abuse had been substantiated against nine priests and the diocese paid out "hundreds of thousands of dollars" in confidential settlement agreements.

Haight could not be reached for comment, though Doyle said he would pass on a request for an interview.

For years, psychologists told church officials that hospitals were an appropriate form of "limited ministry" for priests accused of sexual misconduct, Doyle said. There, he said, unlike schools or other parish positions, they would have little access to children.

For example, the Albany diocese assigned the Rev. James T. Hanley to work as a chaplain at Albany Medical Center Hospital in 1987 shortly after he had undergone counseling for sexually abusing a boy while working in the Diocese of Paterson, N.J.

Shortly before that, Albany church officials reassigned a Capital Region priest, the Rev. David Bentley, now 59, to work as a chaplain at Albany Med after he admitted he had molested a child in 1986. Bentley had been principal of Vincentian Institute High School in Albany.

Church officials did not notify administrators at Albany Med about the two priests' history of sexual abuse. An Albany Med spokesman, Greg McGarry, said administrators learned about the chaplains' backgrounds through news reports.

Administrators at Glens Falls, Albany Med and other Capital Region hospitals said they have never received a complaint about a Roman Catholic priest involving sexual misconduct on hospital grounds.

In at least one case, the church did notify a hospital about a priest's past history of sexual misconduct. The Rev. John J. Varno, 63, of Wynantskill was arrested in 1997 on a public lewdness charge during a State Police investigation of a rest area on Interstate 90 in Schodack. After counseling, he returned to a hospital ministry in 1998 that included Ellis Hospital in Schenectady and others.

"We were conformable after talking to the diocese that it was not going to be a problem, and there has not been a problem," said Ken Rawley, a spokesman at Ellis Hospital.

Before Varno was assigned to Ellis, church officials notified the hospital about his past, which had been reported in the local media. Varno's misconduct did not involve a minor. Varno could not be reached for comment.

One attorney who has handled dozens of civil cases of sexual abuse by clergy in New York and elsewhere said incidents in hospitals are not uncommon.

"My experience has been that these perpetrator priests often find that hospitals or orphanages are good places to meet weak and vulnerable children whose parents are usually urged to leave after visiting hours," said John Aretakis, an attorney who works out of his Rensselaer County home and Manhattan office. "I have seen it on numerous occasions."

Doyle said few priests were assigned to hospitals after getting counseling for sexual misconduct.

Haight is not receiving any pension or stipend from the diocese, Doyle said.

During his years serving the Albany diocese, Haight worked at St. Francis DeSales Church in West Albany, served on the Saratoga Central Catholic High School faculty, and worked at St. Gabriel's Church in Rotterdam and St. Jude's Church in Wynantskill. He was also a nonresident priest at the College of Saint Rose. Between 1980 and 1986, he took a leave of absence to teach in Washington County, Doyle said.