News



Members of Catholics for Change in Our Church take part in a small-group discussion during the January meeting of the group, which advocates for reform in the Pittsburgh Diocese. (Kevin Hayes)

by Madeleine Davison

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The Pittsburgh Diocese is reeling from declining attendance and a massive restructuring program two years after a 2018 Pennsylvania grand jury report uncovered widespread clerical sexual abuse in six dioceses in the state. A lay advocacy group now says diocesan leadership has made few concrete steps to restore trust with parishioners.

"I don't think they've made progress since the grand jury," said Jan Hayes, a leader of the advocacy group known as Catholics for Change in Our Church.

Catholics for Change in Our Church arose out of a meeting of lay parishioners from across the diocese in September 2018, said Kevin Hayes, the group's acting chair. Horrified by the scale of the crisis, members of the new organization wanted to address issues such as insufficient support for survivors, the diocese's financial secrecy, and a lack of leadership roles for laypeople. The organization eventually coalesced into seven focus groups, representing about 1,000 total members, he said.

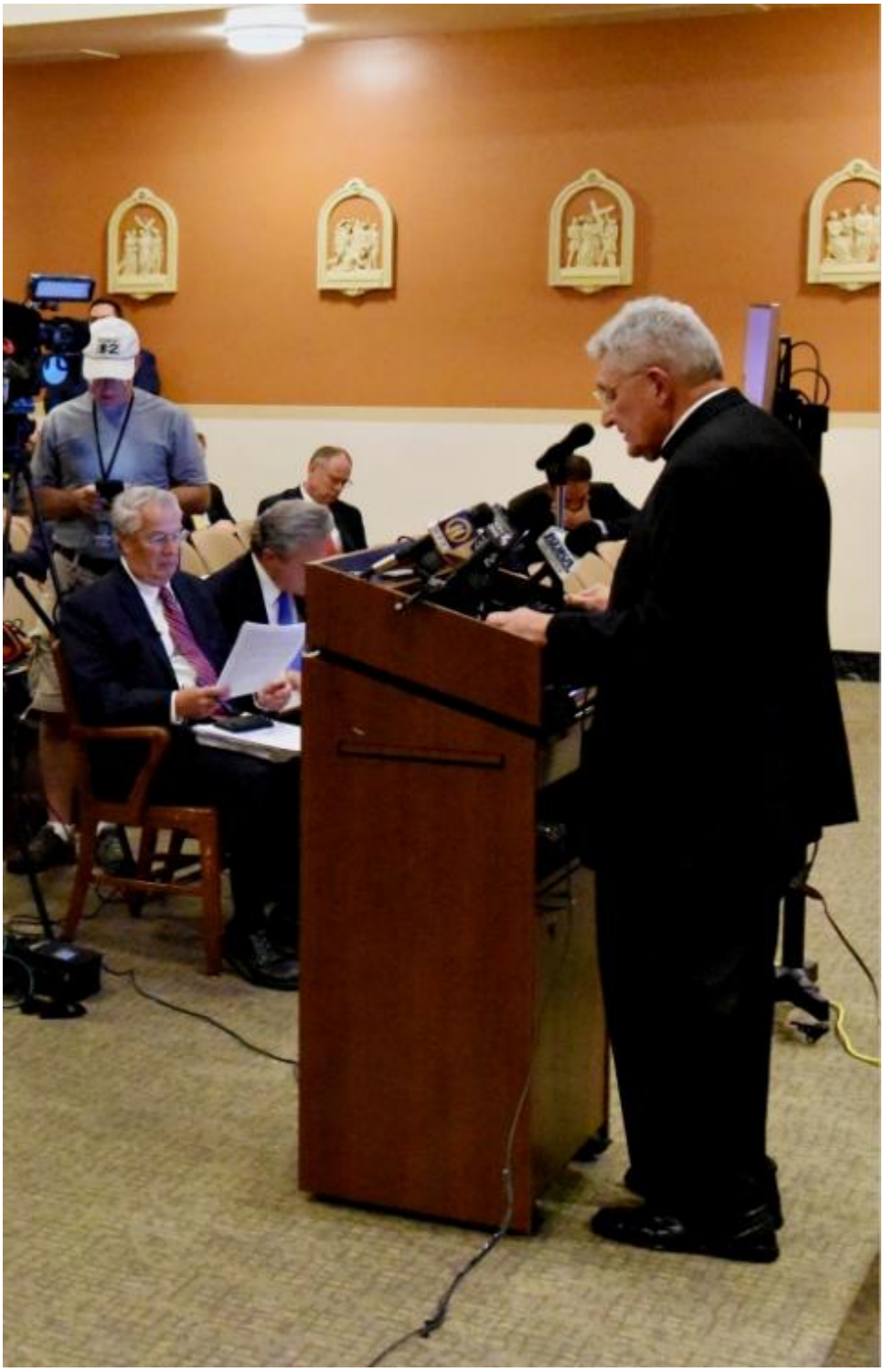
Each focus group targets a different issue identified in two early meetings:

- Providing pathways to lay leadership;
- Diversifying the clergy;
- Engaging young people;
- Promoting lay oversight of the diocese;
- Ensuring financial transparency;
- Supporting survivors of sexual abuse;
- Addressing clericalism.

Some of the group's proposals would work within existing structures, Kevin Hayes said: offering leadership training for lay parishioners, or giving finance councils real authority over parish funds. Others would require changes to church teaching and discipline, such as allowing women and married people to be ordained.

"All too often, the church hierarchy and the clergy in the parishes are again trying to tweak the model that isn't working — making this small change here, that small change there," Kevin Hayes said. "Some of the changes really do need to be structural, and not window dressing."

Meanwhile, the upper levels of church leadership resist solutions such as allowing women and married people to be ordained, said Betsy Cwenar, a Catholics for Change in Our Church focus group leader.



Pittsburgh Bishop David Zubik addresses the media Aug. 14, 2018, the day the Pennsylvania attorney general released a grand jury report on abuse claims spanning a 70-year period in six Catholic dioceses in the state. (CNS/Pittsburgh

Catholic/Chuck Austin)

The Pittsburgh Diocese had been under duress even before the grand jury and COVID-19. In May 2018, a few months before the grand jury report came out, Bishop David Zubik announced a massive restructuring plan that would consolidate Pittsburgh's 188 parishes into just 57 groupings by 2023.

The diocese had seen attendance decline more than 40% between 2000 and 2018, and since the grand jury report, attendance decreased another 9%, according to the diocese. Jennifer Antkowiak, the diocese's executive director of communications and community relations, said that the decrease also coincided with a decrease in the region's population. The number of priests is also on the decline; in just two years, the number of active priests dropped from 216 in 2016 to 178 in 2018, according to the diocese.

These demographic facts, along with the decline in funding due to the abuse crisis and COVID-19, has hampered the diocese's response to long-term structural issues such as clericalism and survivor support. Many parishes are laying off or furloughing their staff, losing lay leaders at a time when the church needs laypeople the most, said Gretchen Jezerc, a leader in the advocacy group.

Slow progress on reforms

The Catholic Church has deep roots in Pittsburgh. About a third of people in the six-county diocese — more than 600,000 total — were Catholic in 2017, according to the grand jury report.

When The Boston Globe broke the story of clergy sex abuse in the archdiocese of Boston in 2002, many Pittsburghers mistakenly believed it was an "anomaly" and chalked it up to poor leadership in that city, said John Costantino, a focus group leader in Catholics for Change in Our Church. He said many Pittsburgh Catholics believed it couldn't happen in their hometown.

The grand jury report, published in August 2018, burst that notion, listing nearly 100 priests in the diocese who had abused children and documenting decades of cover-ups by bishops and other diocesan leaders.

"Pittsburgh is small," Costantino said. "We all know priests that were on that list; we all know people that were affected as well."

When the report came out, churches across the diocese started holding listening sessions so parishioners could air their emotions and experiences. Many laypeople were troubled by the findings, including Jezerc.

At her parish's listening session, Jezerc learned that a classmate from her tiny Catholic grade school died by suicide after he was sexually abused by clergy as a teen.

"I remember sitting there at the listening session we had ... and [the parish director of youth ministry] said the Bible verse, 'But Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.' " Jezerc said. She remembered thinking, "How am I going to leave my church? I have to stay and make it better, not leave."



Mass ends the day for a meeting of more than 80 members of Catholics for Change in Our Church in the Pittsburgh Diocese. The group gathered in January to discuss issues of concern and develop priorities for the coming year. (Kevin Hayes)

Several focus group leaders reported difficulty getting face-to-face meetings with diocesan leadership, a challenge that has increased with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March.

Kevin Hayes and Jezerc said Zubik initially agreed to meet with members of the advocacy group every two to three months, but called it off after just four meetings, while Jan Hayes, who advocates for financial accountability, said she and other members met once with the diocese's chief financial officer and members of its accounting staff.

Kevin Hayes called Zubik's decision to call off the meetings "a bitter disappointment."

"We thought the meetings were helpful for us, but we also thought the meetings were helpful for the diocese because it was apparent to us that the bishop and his staff were not hearing the issues we were bringing to the table."

Meanwhile, Jezerc, Jan Hayes, Kevin Hayes and Costantino said the diocese hasn't made much progress on many of the promises it made in Zubik's March 2019 letter, "The Church Healing."

The diocese did establish an independent commission to compensate victims of sexual abuse, which took claims from survivors from January through September 2019, receiving 369 in total, according to the diocese. It also established a Secretariat for the Protection of Children, Youth and Vulnerable Adults that is responsible for handling current reports of sexual abuse.

Costantino said he and fellow members of the supporting survivors' focus group also put the diocese in touch with mental health care providers who could offer services to clergy sex abuse survivors independently of the diocese, so that survivors wouldn't have to contact the diocese to get referrals for therapy and other support.

But many of the bishop's initial promises remain incomplete, said Jezerc and others. For instance, the diocese had created an Office for Accompaniment as part of its survivor support system, but the directorship is currently vacant, Jezerc and Costantino said.

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In addition, the diocese had promised to report certain financial statistics on its website, such as the aggregate amount of past survivor compensation and the total amount of money disbursed to current survivors by the independent commission, but these numbers have yet to be released on the diocese's financial services web page.

"Many things died on the vine. There has been little follow-through ... and very little structural change done," Kevin Hayes said. "The diocese will point to 'Oh we did this.' ... But substantively, there isn't much that a common layperson would point to and say, 'Yes, this means that the diocese is making changes.' "

The way forward

Cwenar said in light of the ongoing movement for racial justice sparked by the police killing of George Floyd, she and her fellow focus group members are looking for ways to push for racial diversity, as well as gender diversity in church leadership. Pittsburgh only has two Black diocesan priests, according to Antkowiak.

Meanwhile, Jezerc said she and other members of the lay leadership focus group have organized online educational seminars along with the Association of Pittsburgh Priests and gathered a list of lay speakers for adult education in the diocese. Evy Severino, an executive coach and focus group member, hopes to continue offering training for laypeople to learn their strengths and for pastors to learn how to share power with parishioners.

Jezerc and Severino said they see lay leaders as crucial to the future survival of the church. Laypeople, Jezerc said, have a wide variety of specialized skills — accounting, business management, communications — that could benefit parishes if pastors were willing to give laypeople decision-making power.

"A lot of [the abuse crisis] was empowered and enabled by the fact that the laity viewed their own role as sort of the sheep and were constantly looking to the church hierarchy for direction, and to make all the decisions, and, 'Well, they'll take care of that, and we just need to show up and sit in the pews on Sunday,' " Jezerc said.

Jezerc and Jan Hayes also said they intend to keep pushing for lay oversight of the diocese — committees of laypeople independent of the church hierarchy to keep an eye on church finances and abuse claims, among other affairs.



Gretchen Jezerc, vice president of Catholics for Change in Our Church's board, is interviewed by Pittsburgh's CBS affiliate in August 2019, upon the first anniversary of the release of the Pennsylvania grand jury report on child sexual abuse in the Catholic. (Screenshot)

"This self-policing model clearly has let us down," Jezerc said. "There is no way the clergy sex abuse would have been hidden, swept under the rug, priests moved around, reassigned, for 70 years if there had been appropriate lay oversight."

Costantino and his fellow supporting survivors focus group leader and counselor Kathleen Neill said they are working on a blueprint document to help individual parishes better support survivors. They said they'd heard troubling comments both from laypeople and parish priests, dismissing allegations of abuse and urging parishioners to pray for accused priests (but not survivors).

Neill said the lack of empathy can be damaging for survivors and their families.

"Unless you're a survivor or a family member of a survivor, a lot of people don't understand the long-term impact of sexual abuse on a person," said Neill, who has counseled survivors of clergy sexual abuse. "Some priests and parishioners get very defensive and almost hostile and say ... survivors should just get over it, put it in the past. 'They should be forgiving; after all, that's what the church says healing is about — forgiveness.' That is a really big hurdle."

The blueprint Neill and Costantino are developing encourages churches to show greater empathy for survivors, dedicating Masses and prayer candles to survivors and inviting them and their families to seek help in church bulletins and homilies.

Neill and Costantino have also connected with WATCH (We Are The Church), an informal coalition of local lay advocacy groups formed in the aftermath of the abuse crisis in other U.S. cities. Costantino said just prior to the onset of COVID-19 lockdowns, he attended a training session hosted by WATCH to learn more about restorative justice approaches to accountability for sexual abuse. He said these approaches, which include healing circles for survivors and their communities to share their experiences, might help break down the defensiveness he's seen from many pastors and parishioners.

Finally, Costantino and Kevin Hayes said they're continuing to urge the diocese — and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops — to offer a "clear, unconditional" apology for the abuse crisis and the cover-ups that enabled it.

Antkowiak said that no apology could ever be "adequate in the face of abuse," but that the diocese did offer an apology at the beginning of Zubik's press conference on the grand jury report and held a service of reparation in September 2018 as well as a Year of Repentance.

"The Church is profoundly indebted to those courageous victims/survivors who have helped us grow in understanding of the damage caused by sexual abuse and of how the Church community can offer them understanding and support," Zubik said in a statement issued a year after the grand jury report. "We are grateful, and humbled, by the victims/survivors who have reached out to help us help them. It is my prayer that all victims/survivors will feel welcome and have a sense of belonging in our parishes, to whatever extent they desire to be involved in the Church."

Hayes said he still feels the diocese has not taken full responsibility for its role in the crisis.

"There still has not been a true mea culpa — an apology — from the diocese," Hayes said. "For not only the abuse that occurred, but the role the diocese played in not revealing the truth about the extent of the abuse. ... Only when that accountability occurs can there be movement towards true reconciliation."

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