

Group presses for grand jury investigation of bishop, diocese

Joshua J. McElwee | Jun. 17, 2011



SNAP representatives Mike Hunter and David Clohessy speak during a press conference June 17 (NCR photo/Joshua J. McElwee)

KANSAS CITY, Mo. -- Victims advocates have called for a local grand jury investigation into the Kansas City-St. Joseph diocese's sex abuse procedures.

"We're making an appeal to prosecutors to launch a full-fledged grand jury investigation into clergy sex crimes and cover-ups in the Kansas City Catholic diocese," said David Clohessy, executive director of the Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests, in a press conference this morning.

Three cases of allegations of sexual misconduct by clergy in the Kansas City diocese have come to light in recent weeks.

One priest was arrested on charges of possession of child pornography May 19, but the diocese had waited five months before taking evidence to the police. Another pastor was removed from ministry June 3 over allegations of sexual abuse of minors dating back to the 1970s and '80s. It came to light June 9 that a man had accused the diocesan vicar general of sexual misconduct four years ago over an incident that had occurred in 1984.

Clohessy said evidence documenting mismanagement of the cases was submitted to prosecutors in three counties today.

"Citizens and Catholics deserve an independent, thorough look at how these crimes are being dealt with," said Clohessy.

Fr. Shawn Ratigan, a local pastor whose computer was found to contain child pornography in December, was moved to a religious sisters' community in January. He lived there for five months before his May 19 arrest.

Another local pastor, Fr. Michael Tierney, was removed from active ministry June 2. Tierney had been accused of misconduct earlier, and a lawsuit alleging abuse was filed against him in 2010. The diocese review board had found the earlier allegation not credible. But in May the board met with one person whose allegations they did

find credible and also received information from two other individuals making accusations against Tierney.

"Fr. Tierney continues to deny these allegations," the diocese said in statement June 2.

Finn received a letter accusing Msgr. Robert Murphy, the vicar general, of sexual misconduct four years ago, *The Kansas City Star* reported June 9. As vicar general, Murphy received cases of allegations of sex abuse by church workers and made recommendations about how to handle the cases, including which cases to send to the review board.

Jean Peters Baker, prosecutor for Jackson County, which includes Kansas City, told *NCR* that while she had not received the materials from SNAP she would "absolutely" review them.

Although Baker said she could not comment on the specifics of possible investigations surrounding the sex abuse cases, she said that a grand jury investigation is "not something we take lightly."

"It's my job and the job of the office to look at what's a fair and prudent use of the grand jury system," said Baker, who was appointed to her role May 6. "We do not use the grand jury for fishing expeditions."

Clohessy said he believed at least eight local, state and federal grand jury investigations have been invoked since 2002 to look into dioceses' responses to allegations of sex abuse. While he said he had no indication whether an investigation is ongoing in Kansas City, he said prosecutors had "good reasons" to pursue charges here.

"Arguably, these recent KC scandals are much more attractive to a prosecutor because the crimes and cover-ups are so recent," said Clohessy.

"The sheer timing of these violations should really convince prosecutors if they don't act this horror will continue."

Ratigan, 45, who is being held on \$200,000 bond, has pleaded not guilty. He made a brief court appearance yesterday. The case was continued to July 21.

Ratigan's computer was first found to have images of child pornography in December.

The principal of the elementary school attached to the parish where Ratigan served also wrote a letter a year ago, addressed to Murphy, detailing concerns teachers and parents had about Ratigan's interactions with children.

In a press conference May 27, Finn told reporters that Murphy briefed him about principal Julie Hess' May 19, 2010, letter at the time but that Finn himself had not read it.

Brian Heydon, a local licensed professional counselor, wrote a letter to Finn in 2007 alleging that Murphy had propositioned him for sex in 1984 after the two had met to discuss a possible vocation the priesthood.

In a May 4, 2007 letter responding to Heydon, Finn wrote that while the accusation "has given rise to serious discussions and considerations," it "does not square with others' life-long knowledge of this priest."

"As troubling as these accusations are, I cannot conclude that they are compelling in their most serious claims," wrote Finn in his letter.

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