

SNAP conference offers legal updates, healing

Brian Roewe | Aug. 1, 2012

The meeting agenda of the largest advocacy group for victims of clergy sex abuse was filled with updates on the group's legal matters, but for many in attendance, the gathering also offered hope for healing and an opportunity to be understood.

The Survivors Network for those Abused by Priests, or SNAP, held its annual conference July 27-29 in Chicago. The more than 200 who attended heard updates on a Missouri court's order to release documents to lawyers representing accused priests; the group's case before an international criminal court; and the recent abuse trials in Pennsylvania.

SNAP has [appealed the Missouri court order to the state's Supreme Court](#) [1] and expected a decision from the high court as the conference began, but nothing emerged. Barbara Blaine, the group's founder and president, said that while the order has spread fear, victims have also expressed relief that the group's leadership is intent on fighting to keep members' information private.

"I think that has meant a great deal to a lot of people," Blaine said.

"We have a resolve that we're telling truth and we're exposing truth. And the problem is that our truths happen to be tied to incredibly painful and embarrassing information and we can't separate that out. But the bottom line is, that it is a commitment to truth, and that doesn't change," she said.

While a decision on the Missouri order is yet to come, those at the conference were briefed on the [group's case before the International Criminal Court at the Hague in the Netherlands](#) [2].

Filed last September, the case alleges that the widespread sexual abuse by clergy and the handling of those cases by church officials constitute crimes against humanity.

Among the four church leaders the case describes as "persons who can be considered to bear the greatest responsibility for the crimes" are Pope Benedict XVI and Cardinal William Levada, the former Prefect for the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith.

Speaking at the conference, Pamela Spees, senior staff attorney with the Center for Constitutional Rights who is representing SNAP at the ICC, said the case remains in an examination stage as a prosecutor determines if the court has jurisdiction over the alleged crimes. SNAP filed a supplemental communication to their case in April.

There is no timetable for a decision, Spees told *NCR*, adding that some cases can take years before exiting the preliminary examination phase.

"By their very nature, these crimes are complicated and complex, and so it takes quite a while to effectively investigate and prosecute, so it can take some time," she said.

In talking with people at the conference, Spees said she sensed much enthusiasm and support for the case, which

she said symbolizes strength among victims.

"It certainly represents empowerment, and it represents solidarity with other survivors in other parts of the world who aren't in a position to take steps like this because they're isolated and don't feel that they can talk about it in their communities or in their families," Spees said.

Because of the ICC case, Blaine said SNAP has seen its membership grow among the international community. It now counts members in 67 countries, with people from eight nations outside the U.S. attending the conference, including Spain, Ireland, Colombia and Peru.

With its numbers increasing outside the U.S., Blaine and other leaders spent the day after the conference formally ended meeting with its international members, listening to their stories and working on ways to connect across distances.

"I think that there's a bond that we all share as victims. We were all taught the same, identical types of things about the priests who were in that position of power and authority over us. And when they violated their authority, and shattered our innocence, the experience of that is universal," Blaine said.

Blaine said a resounding theme she has heard from victims in other countries is that their perpetrators often remain in ministry. She hopes better networks with victims outside the U.S. through technology like Skype will help create stronger support groups and leadership.

Other highlights of the conference included a Philadelphia prosecutor from the William J. Lynn case, which [ended in the former secretary for clergy sentenced to prison for up to six years](#) [3]; speakers representing the Jewish and Southern Baptist traditions; and a performance of the one-man play, "James X," which chronicles an Irish victim's own story of abuse, as he confronts and tries to overcome his painful past.

"For many of us viewing this very dramatic portrayal of James as he grows up, it's almost as though he's telling my story," said Blaine. "And the experience of many of us is like wow, that's what happened to me, that's how I felt, and so that's very affirming."

The crux of the conference for many, though, was speaking and listening to others who shared their stories.

"I think that's the main thing the conference is," said Becky Ianni. "You know the speakers are great, the breakouts are great, but talking to people who understand what you're going through is priceless, and you can't find that anywhere else."

Ianni joined SNAP in 2006 after she spoke with executive director David Clohessy at a moment of "feeling completely overwhelmed." While attending her first conference a year later, she became the Virginia/Washington D.C. director, eager to pay it forward.

"That's how I became a leader, because I wanted to help someone else out the way David helped me. And to me, that's the focus of the conference. "helping others the way I was helped," she said.

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