

# Sex Abuse Victims Band Together

■ **Therapy:** Members of self-help group share stories and look for healing. Many cite fear, distrust of church.

By SHARON COHEN  
ASSOCIATED PRESS

**C**HESTERFIELD, Mo.—Once a month, Pam Payne speaks out about the secret and shame that have scarred her soul. It's her way of purging a painful past.

For more than 25 years, she kept silent, never telling her parents, her friends, not even the man to whom she was married for 12 years. Now, she talks openly about the trauma of being sexually abused by a Catholic priest as a young girl.

"I'd gotten so good at saying, 'This didn't hurt, it didn't happen, it's not that big a deal,'" she says, her deep green eyes flashing. "I made it my life's work to bury this stuff. I can't do that while I'm here."

As she speaks, she sits in a

condominium clubhouse in suburban St. Louis, surrounded by 20 men and women. They listen to her raptly. Then, one by one, they tell their stories. They too have indelible memories. They too are prisoners of the past.

Each story told this night is different. Each is similar too: A harrowing tale of sexual abuse by a clergy member, a trust betrayed, a life changed.

Some are scared. Some are angry. But all are survivors.

These people baring their souls are members of the Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests, a Chicago-based self-help group with chapters in cities across the nation.

They meet to heal one another and urge victims to seek help from therapists, family, law enforcement—anywhere but the church.

"You just get hurt more when

you go to the church," declares Barbara Blaine, the group's founder.

"There have been instances where people have been victimized again, sometimes intentionally and sometimes not," said David Clohessy, head of the St. Louis chapter. "I've seen cases where diocesan officials deliberately string survivors along until the statute of limitations . . . has expired."

Clohessy, who says a priest sexually abused him for four years as a teen, guides the evening's meeting gently.

No harsh questions are asked, no judgments are made, no one is asked for proof.

Most members—they range in age from their 20s to their 60s—have not gone public. But behind closed doors, they speak freely of families who question their memories and church officials who doubt their stability.

"One of the biggest things we learn is we're not crazy," counsels

Please see **VICTIMS**, A21

## CRISIS: Diocese Struggles With Scandal

Continued from A18

ing investigation. They are not in parishes.

Margason defends the new policy of naming the accused, saying protecting children is more important than potentially violating civil rights. He insists the church isn't determining guilt or innocence.

He compares his diocese to a family struggling with sexual abuse.

"There's some denial that this is a real problem," he said. "I get letters telling me . . . 'Stop doing this. Put the priests back in. They're good priests.' . . . There are others who would say I'm not going far enough."

But the church's approach irks Clohessy, of the Survivors Network.

"No institution in society can

effectively police itself, nor should any institution be allowed to," he said. "They try to play investigator, prosecutor, spiritual confessor and comforter . . . and they can't."

Most accusers have not gone public. In private, though, they—and lawyers and therapists—detail sordid charges dating back 25 years of diocesan priests showing young boys pornography, buying them gifts, and fondling and raping them in hotel rooms, rectories and private lodges.

Two men have made formal accusations against the Rev. Robert Vonnahmen of St. Joseph's Catholic Church in Elizabethtown, one of the eight removed this spring.

Stephen McCaffrey, now a 25-year-old insurance agent in Albuquerque, N.M., has filed a \$3.5-mil-

lion lawsuit, alleging Vonnahmen seduced and sodomized him in 1981 when the priest ran a Catholic summer camp he attended.

"He said, 'If you tell anyone, I will tell your parents you tried to burn down a building and kill your favorite horse,'" McCaffrey said. "He stole . . . my dignity, my spirituality and my body."

McCaffrey said he suppressed all memory of the abuse until recently and didn't contact church officials because "I really didn't think I would be taken seriously."

William Thomas Boyd of Carbondale, Ill., who works as a tour guide, has filed a sexual harassment complaint with the state, claiming Vonnahmen insisted on sexual favors in exchange for employment. The priest operates

Please see **CRISIS**, A23