10-1-08 - Sex abuse lawsuit: Groups say Belleville diocese may be hiding assets
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Members of three church watch-dog groups called Monday on Belleville Bishop Edward Braxton to conduct an outside audit of diocesan finances to determine whether money exists to pay a $5 million sex abuse judgment.

Dave Clohessy, national director of the St. Louis-based Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, said an outside audit is needed because the diocese may be hiding assets.

"In 20 years, I have yet to see a diocese that when pressed by legal pressure hasn't disclosed more wealth and assets and insurance coverage and property than they typically disclose in their routine audits," he said. "They almost always come up with more wealth and they initially disclose."

In a hallway at the pastoral center just before 7 p.m. Monday, Braxton told a News-Democrat reporter to wait and he would return to answer questions. However, Braxton went into the gym where the event was held, and when a reporter again approached him, a man blocked his way and said the meeting was private and the reporter should leave.

In August, a St. Clair County jury awarded $5 million to former altar boy James Wisniewski, 47, of Champaign. During the civil trial, Wisniewski testified that beginning about when he was about 13, he was sexually abused for years by the Rev. Raymond Kownacki, of Dupo. The 73-year old priest was removed from ministry in 1995 because of sexual abuse of minors. Kownacki has declined to comment.

Clohessy and the others from watchdog groups, including Lena Woltering, of Call To Action, and Anne Harter, of the Fellowship of Southern Illinois Laity, called on Braxton to reverse his decision to seek a new trial in the Wisniewski case. If Braxton's request is rejected by a judge, then a formal appeal to the 5th Appellate Court in Mount Vernon could be filed.

Members of the groups also called upon Braxton to apologize for referring to Wisniewski as an "alleged victim" in his letter last weekend to parishioners announcing his decision. During the eight-day trial, diocesan lawyers did not challenge testimony and evidence that Kownacki sexually abused Wisniewski and other minors during the early 1970s and later. Testimony also went unchallenged that church leaders, including former Belleville Bishop James Keleher, knew about the abuse but still transferred Kownacki to unsuspecting parishes.

"Kownacki's abuse was in their records," Woltering said. "The trial showed that. It was their own documents that convicted them."

The church has insurance coverage to a limit of $20 million, according to the 2007 diocesan financial statement, but there is a question of whether the insurers will pay.

According to an article Sunday in the Spokane, Wash.-based Spokesman Review, parishioners raised $7 million to satisfy an outstanding $10 million judgment resulting from lawsuits alleging sexual abuse by priests decades ago. The newspaper reported that a total settlement of $48 million was reached last spring and was partially satisfied through insurance payouts and the sale of church land and investments. The Spokane diocese has about 95,000 parishioners; Belleville has 110,000.

Evidence produced during the trial showed that in 2007, the diocese earned about $3.5 million from interest on long-range investments. In 2006, the interest income was about $2.5 million.

Clohessy said current audits show that the $5 million can be paid without disrupting church services even though Braxton's letter stated that program and services would be sharply curtailed if the judgment was paid.

"The job of a shepherd is to protect his flock: The boys and girls and the adults, not the dollars," Clohessy said. "I would challenge Bishop Braxton ... to show us what Jesus says about protecting the vulnerable versus protecting the wealth and the assets."