

## Vancouver archdiocese abuse review was 'difficult but transformative'

Whenever a group of people with different opinions gather at a table to discuss a controversial topic, sparks are bound to fly.

But Archdiocese of Vancouver lawyer Mary Margaret MacKinnon said the experience can be surprisingly instructive, too. That was her experience while chairing the Case Review Committee that studied 36 cases of sexual abuse by priests in Vancouver since the 1950s over 13 months. Its report was released Nov. 22.

"It was difficult in some ways because we had a bunch of divergent voices at the table, but it was also transformative because it let us hear from people who we haven't heard from at the table before," she told *The B.C. Catholic*.

These voices included four victims of abuse, lay people of various professions, a religious sister and two non-Catholics. All 13 members of the Case Review Committee gathered for seven long meetings to study abuse cases and come up with recommendations for the Archdiocese of Vancouver.

MacKinnon, a lawyer whose practice focuses on personal injury and sexual abuse claims, has been handling abuse cases for more than 30 years. The horrific stories don't shock her anymore, but the willingness of this group to listen to those around the table did.

"We were able to see things from different perspectives and understand how people felt and what needed to change," she said. "There was a huge amount of respect and compassion and goodwill in the room that resulted in some fundamentally directive shifts."

Those fundamental shifts include hiring two independent investigators to study all files related to sexual abuse by priests, publishing names and photos of clerics who have abused minors or adults (subject to relevant privacy legislation), and inviting victims to come forward with allegations and offering safe places for them to heal.

In the past, "people were encouraged to not speak about abuse because their families didn't want them to disparage the Church. That is an attitude which we need to move beyond," she said.

One issue that caused friction for committee members was publishing names and photos of priests. While their recommendations called for a full list of all clergy found "credibly accused" of abuse, the Archdiocese of Vancouver in its report only released nine names.

Critics like Ontario lawyer Rob Talach have called the archdiocese's decision

not to release all names due to privacy laws “a very sophisticated dodge.” Victims have also been critical of the decision.

But MacKinnon said releasing the names of priests involved in all 36 cases is a complex issue. Privacy laws aside, some allegations were not properly investigated and, in two cases, the victims couldn't remember their abusers' names. In some cases, the priest died before allegations came out.

“A lot of these files were 40 years old, 50 years old, and nobody really did any evaluation on the issue: ‘Is this reasonably, probably true?’ ”

Going forward, the archdiocese has hired non-Catholic veteran lawyers Cleta Brown and Mary Pickering to conduct independent investigations. It already has a policy of notifying police of all reports of abuse.

As for historic cases, “if you put ‘probably did this’ up on your website, a guy's reputation, everything, is gone forever,” MacKinnon said. “An important consideration is: should you be doing that if you're not sure?”

Now that the report is published and other Canadian dioceses are considering releasing their own reports, MacKinnon said the work is just beginning. She hopes victims of abuse feel encouraged to come forward. She also hasn't ruled out the possibility there are more priests who need to be held to account.

“If people are listening who have been damaged or injured by the Church, they have to know that there is a huge willingness to hear their voices and attempt to work with them to make the system a better system and help them in a real way.”