

## Abuse may lead to exodus of German Catholics

Niels Sorrells Religion News Service | Jun. 25, 2010

**BERLIN** -- In the months since news of child sexual abuse scandals roiled German society, barely a week goes by without news of yet another Catholic parish reporting declining membership.

While it may be premature to estimate the long-term impact of the scandal -- especially since many of the cases were decades old -- the latest figures were startling enough to raise concern in the German Conference of Bishops.

Last year, well before the scandal erupted in earnest this spring, 125,585 Germans chose to leave the Catholic church, up from 121,155 in 2008, according to the bishops.

"This high number of departures cannot leave us at peace. Anyone who leaves the church wants to fulfill his faith and his life's desires without the church in the future," said Archbishop Robert Zollitsch of Freiburg, the bishops' president, in a recent statement.

"That kind of decision always raises questions directed at us from which we cannot shy away."

The numbers provide both clarity and confusion about the state of the Catholic Church in Pope Benedict XVI's homeland. Germans are given the option to officially register themselves with a variety of churches; most Germans choose the Catholic or Lutheran churches.

Once registered, a portion of the person's salary may be diverted to a tax to support the church. It also means the registered church member is entitled to church services, ranging from day care to basic sacraments. Registering, however, does not mean a person necessarily attends church regularly.

Numbers released by the bishop's conference show the first big rise in departures came in the 1970s, with dropouts reaching 83,172 in 1974. After that, the next big spike was in 1992, with 192,766 departures.

The 2009 numbers could be especially disconcerting to the bishops because the dawn of the 21st century saw a trend toward fewer people leaving the church, hitting a low of 84,389 departures in 2006. The latest figures hint another uptick may be in the offing.

Conference figures estimate only about 13.4 percent of registered parishioners regularly attend services, as of 2008. Separately, a recent survey by the GfK pollsters showed only 55 percent of German expressed trust in church institutions, down from 72 percent last year.

Church officials plan to release an analysis on the trend this summer. And they see some good news in the figures -- the rate at which departures increase has slowed; some people are joining the church (4,388 in 2008) or rejoining (9,546); and tens of thousands of children were baptized or confirmed in every year on record.

Nonetheless, few expect the overall trend to reverse itself any time soon. Worse, no one is really sure how to

bring about change.

"It's a trend that has been going on for a while," says Christian Weisner, spokesman for We Are Church, a lay organization advocating for modernizing reforms. "The trend is always there. It's strengthened by news like this," he said, referring to the scandals.

It's not clear if the loss of the church tax income will lead the church to make any changes. While the loss of funding could hurt, the church has other income that will likely keep it from struggling to pay its bills.

Weisner, whose group encourages Catholics to stay in the church and work for reform, said the situation is far from hopeless. He notes that there is always a certain percentage of people considering leaving the church, but many of those never do.

He also noted German Lutherans have seen even higher numbers of departures in recent years -- 168,901 in 2009 alone -- a striking change in the birthplace of the Reformation.

"The emotional ties to the Catholic church are stronger," he argues.

Rainer Kampling, a Catholic theologian at the Free University of Berlin, cautioned against assuming why people feel the need to leave the church.

"You have to differentiate between a tendency and a catalyst," he said, noting people might have been primed to leave the church anyway, and just used the abuse scandal as an excuse.

Weisner argues the church should survey ex-members and find out why they left. At a recent conference, Weisner noted that one bishop announced plans to look up each former parishioner individually to ask them why they left.

"I think that would be important. People should explain their reasons for leaving the church," he said. "We have to go to the people. We have to listen to them."

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