

Bishop criticizes singling out Irish church for mishandling abuse

DUBLIN, Ireland – A senior Irish bishop criticized the singling out of the Catholic Church for mishandling allegations of child sexual abuse.

Bishop Christopher Jones of Elphin, chairman of the bishops' Committee for Family and Children, said 95 percent of abuse happens within families and that people are afraid to talk about it.

"The church is being isolated. Some people are being extremely unfair and unjust towards the church. The cover up of child abuse has gone on all across society," he said as bishops gathered in Kildare for their spring plenary meeting.

"We bishops have made terrible mistakes when it comes to child protection but we know the overwhelming amount of child abuse takes place in families, and families cover that up too," he said.

Bishop Jones added, "for the first time now victims all across the board are being given the chance to speak out and be heard."

His comments came after it was revealed that at least 23 children died while in the care of Irish authorities during the last 10 years. Children's advocates have decried the government's policy on child protection.

Maeve Lewis, executive director of One in Four, a victims support group, said the government's reaction to child abuse had been "shameful and lacking in any sense of urgency." The opposition Fine Gael party's spokesman on children, Alan Shatter, accused the government of a "systematic culture of cover up" of child neglect.

Irish Catholics are awaiting a pastoral letter from Pope Benedict XVI to address the issue of clerical abuse after the church was rocked by two judicial reports which found that bishops and religious superiors put the avoidance of scandal ahead of the welfare of children.

Bishop John McAreevey of Dromore said the bishops had no indication when the pastoral letter would be published. However, he said he hoped it would be before Easter.