

German bishops OK new guidelines for handling sex abuse claims

OXFORD, England – Germany's Catholic bishops have approved new guidelines for handling claims of sex abuse by church personnel to facilitate cooperation with law enforcement bodies.

The guidelines, in preparation since February, were approved by the bishops' permanent council at a meeting in Wurzburg. A statement from the German bishops' conference said Bishop Stephan Ackermann of Trier, who was appointed in February as the church's point-man for abuse claims, will present the guidelines at a news conference Aug. 31.

The new guidelines will replace 2002 guidelines and are expected to be expanded to include all church personnel, not just clergy.

In an Aug. 26 telephone interview with Catholic News Service, Ludwig Ring-Eifel, editor-in-chief of the German Catholic news agency KNA, said the likely extension of the guidelines to teachers at Catholic schools and other lay church employees would help "bring greater security" to children in church institutions.

"They may well help the emergence of a more positive image of the church," he said. "But it will take at least five years to repair the damage done by recent scandals, during which time the media could dig up new abuse cases."

Since January, when abuse claims were made against staff at a Jesuit-run college in Berlin, many German dioceses and religious orders have faced accusations of abuse by priests.

In February, the bishops' conference opened a hotline offering advice, therapy and contacts for victims. In May, Pope Benedict XVI accepted the resignation of Bishop Walter Mixa of Augsburg after claims he beat children at a church-run orphanage before he was a bishop.

In June, a German prosecutor said he was investigating accusations against the

president of the German bishops' conference, Archbishop Robert Zollitsch of Freiburg. The accuser said the prelate had been an accessory to the abuse of children in the 1960s and had allowed an abusive priest to return to his diocese in 1987. The archdiocese rejected the allegations, accusing the media of sensationalism.

"Public interest in this issue has fallen sharply, so the church will get fewer headlines about the new guidelines than it did for past abuse cases," said Ring-Eifel.

The number of Catholics leaving the German church by giving up paying the traditional church tax doubled in the first six months of 2010, according to church data, with the highest departures reported in western and southern parts of the country.

"But there are signs church membership is not dropping as sharply as it did a few months ago, and that Mass attendance has even increased in some areas, with many Catholics wanting to know what their priests and bishops think about the situation," said Ring-Eifel. "As more abuse cases come to light outside the church, furthermore, people seem to be forming a more balanced judgment and not just seeing this as a church problem."