

Restoring Trust

Based on a paper presented by the Rev. Peter Rogness,
when he served as bishop of the Greater Milwaukee Synod

Care of victims is paramount

This church seeks to provide pastoral care for victims in their healing and attempts to avoid re-victimizing, during the church's adjudication process, those who have been wounded.

The church strives to protect victims from being blamed by others for the pastor's misconduct by always explaining that it is the clergy person's responsibility to maintain proper boundaries in their relationships with parishioners. The victims of the misconduct control the information they share with us, and which we need in order to take action. Even when that makes our jobs more difficult, we try to respect their wishes.

People must know their local congregation is a safe place

There is far more at stake in responding appropriately to allegations of clergy sexual misconduct than just one case in one place. Every member of every congregation must have confidence that their congregation is a safe place. If confidence is to be maintained, the public must know that misconduct in the pastoral office is not tolerated.

This means that no allegations will be ignored and no actual misconduct will be kept secret. In order for congregations to be places of care for the weak and broken, our clergy must be ones to whom the most vulnerable can safely turn to receive the love of God.

The integrity of the public office of ministry is at stake

It may surprise the public to know that nowhere is there stronger support for a firm response to clergy misconduct than among the clergy themselves. The vast majority of clergy is faithful and trustworthy, and they know their own reputations are damaged when clergy misconduct holds the public's attention.

When a pastor has been disciplined for misconduct, or resigns following allegations of misconduct, the overwhelming response of other clergy is both deep sadness and strong support for the action taken. They understand that the integrity of the pastoral office is at stake.

The church follows fair procedures

This church tries to care for and protect the person claiming to have suffered abuse, as well as the congregation. At the same time, no formal disciplinary action can proceed on the basis of flimsy or anonymous accusations. The church's adjudication process requires written charges and, if necessary, the presentation of evidence at a hearing.

A member of the clergy who disputes the allegations may get a hearing before a panel of persons elected by the synod and churchwide assemblies. There is an appeal process in which the hearing panel's decision may be subject to review. A member of the clergy accused of misconduct may choose to resign from the clergy roster at any time, thereby bringing an end to the process.

Disclosure is made to congregations

When a pastor has been accused and removed, or when a discipline process is entered into, the congregation is informed of both the nature of the allegations and the nature of the process. When a pastor resigns from the clergy roster rather than disputing the charges, disclosure is made to congregational members. Such disclosure is done for at least three reasons:

1. Congregations need to know of matters that affect their life so directly. Accurate information is the best way to dispel rumors, doubt and uncertainty.
2. Only through disclosure can the church invite healing – for victims both known and unknown – and for members of the congregation who experience the pain of betrayal. Cover-ups are like toxic dumps, with poison seeping out for years afterward, making healing very difficult.
3. Disclosure makes it clear to all that the church does not condone or minimize the misconduct of its clergy. Even years later, if a pastor removed for misconduct seeks reinstatement to the clergy roster – a very rare occurrence – full disclosure is made.

Secrecy destroys trust. Disclosure, even when unpleasant (and it often is) is the healthier action. Yes, the truth often does hurt, but it is preferable to the lie.

Many continue to work hard so the public ministry of the church can be regarded as safe, compassionate, and entitled to trust.



**Evangelical Lutheran
Church in America**

Living in God's amazing grace