

Diocese of Northwestern Pennsylvania
Some Information about Bishop Davis' Misconduct
July 11, 2010

Background.

Within the past three months, Bishop Sean W. Rowe has received information about four women who have made credible allegations that when they were girls, they were sexually abused by the late Donald J. Davis, who was bishop of the Diocese of Northwest Pennsylvania from 1974 to 1991. In two cases, we know that the abuse took place at the diocesan summer camp in the late 1970's or early 1980's when the girls were between the ages of 9 and 11. The other two victims were abused over time when they were children.

Bishop Rowe was unaware of these matters until a woman came forward on March 30 of this year with allegations of abuse that occurred sometime between 1978 and 1980. We are in conversations with this woman that we hope will foster the healing and reconciliation that we as the church seek for all of God's people. As soon as Bishop Rowe talked with the victim, he began an investigation to determine if the diocese had records of any other such incidents. It was his intention that the church deal appropriately with this grievous situation. During Bishop Rowe's investigation, he learned of three other victims who had come forward in the past. These victims wish to remain anonymous.

The existence of four known victims leads us to believe that there may be others, and we want to reach out to them so that the healing and reconciliation that is so long overdue can begin. Bishop Rowe has spoken directly with Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori and she supports this disclosure.

Sexual abuse in any form is abhorrent in any community, and those of us who are leaders in the church should feel particular shame when one of our own has betrayed the trust and innocence of children. We can't undo the horrible abuse that Bishop Davis committed nor the pain of his victims, but we can ensure that, from now on, we tell the truth and seek healing and reconciliation for those who have been harmed.

Who else knew?

We have been unable to determine who knew at the time the abuse took place other than the victims and their abuser. We don't know which victims told family members or friends, and we don't know if people close to Bishop Davis realized what was happening.

We have learned that some church leaders became aware of this situation some years later. Our recent investigation indicates that Bishop Rowe's predecessor, Bishop Robert Rowley, who died in January 2010, became aware of the abuse of three, and possibly four victims, as early as 1993. He reported this abuse to the Office of the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, met with victims, and attempted to arrange counseling for them.

Upon Bishop Rowley's report, the Most Rev. Edmond Browning, Presiding Bishop of The Episcopal Church from 1986-1997 and the Rt. Rev. Harold Hopkins, a member of his staff, were involved in resolving the claims of one of the victims and the private discipline of Bishop Davis, who by that time had retired to Sarasota, Florida.

How was Bishop Davis disciplined?

At Presiding Bishop Browning's initiative in early 1994, Bishop Davis agreed to resign from the House of Bishops, in which bishops retain their membership even if retired. Additionally he agreed to refrain from any priestly or episcopal duties, to undergo pastoral counseling, to see a psychiatrist and to contribute to the cost of counseling for one of the victims. In assenting to Bishop Browning's request, Donald Davis was effectively removed as a bishop of the church. His abuse was not made public.

Did the church alert civil authorities or make this public in any way?

No. There are no records indicating that anyone outside the church was alerted.

How would this kind of matter be handled today?

If allegations of sexual abuse involving children against a living member of the clergy surfaced today, it would be handled differently, and the Diocese of Northwestern Pennsylvania would immediately contact civil authorities and begin canon law processes. Bishop Rowe has said, "I can't speak for what seemed right to the church's leaders of the past, and I do know that several of the victims specifically asked that their situations not be made public. But I don't know exactly why church leaders handled the situation the way they did."

Have you attempted to contact other women who attended the diocesan summer camp as girls?

The diocese does not own the camp and rents it only a few weeks a summer from another denomination. The events we are aware of all occurred approximately thirty years ago and we do not keep registration lists that long. The camp itself does not maintain records about our campers.

Does the Diocese know the identity of the victims?

Yes. They wish to remain anonymous and Bishop Rowe has no desire to disclose their identity, which would only be likely to result in embarrassment and discomfort for them.

Are there any reports of abuse after Bishop Davis was disciplined?

Not that we are aware of. But we are asking girls or women who were abused, or who have information about abuse, no matter when or where it happened, to come forward.

What is the likely financial effect of this situation on the diocese?

Any conversation about finances is, at this point, purely speculative. But we are more concerned with avoiding the bankruptcy of our souls than of our bank accounts. We want to reach out to

Bishop Davis' victims and respond in whatever ways we can to heal the wounds that he inflicted on them.

With whom did Bishop Rowe consult before deciding to make this information public?

When the investigation following the March 30 report discovered additional victims, Bishop Rowe realized he was dealing with a situation very much different than he expected to find. Since this situation was entirely new, he consulted with Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori; Bishop Clay Matthews, the bishop from the Office of Pastoral Development; as well as the chancellor to the Presiding Bishop; and the Diocese of Northwestern Pennsylvania's chancellor.

What happens next?

We will continue our conversations with the woman who came forward in late March and begin conversations with other victims we hear from.

What is the Diocese doing to make sure this doesn't happen again?

Bishop Rowe has said:

"As the bishop of this diocese, I am deeply committed to the safety and well-being of everyone who attends our churches and diocesan programs. The Diocese of Northwestern Pennsylvania is now a place where we make every effort to deal responsibly and responsively with complaints and allegations of misconduct. This includes making reports to the appropriate authorities when child abuse is suspected. All of our clergy, staff and volunteers who work with children go through training called Safeguarding God's Children, and we are implementing a new misconduct policy, based on the model policy of the Church Pension Group, that has been in process for more than a year.

Misconduct is a most serious violation of the sacred trust given by the Church to bishops, clergy, and church workers to care for and respect the dignity of the people of God. The church must be a place where people can come with the deepest wounds and vulnerabilities and be safe. Our churches must be places where children are nurtured and respected and cared for and never harmed or abused in any way."