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contact: Rebecca Wilson, 330-524-2067, rebecca@canticlecommunications.com

EPISCOPAL BISHOP ASKS ABUSE VICTIMS TO COME FORWARD

Late Bishop Donald Davis Sexually Abused Girls in 1970s and 1980s

ERIE, PENNSYLVANIA, July 11, 2010—The Episcopal bishop of the Erie-based Diocese of Northwestern Pennsylvania is reaching out to women who may have been sexually abused in their childhoods by one of his deceased predecessors, asking them to contact him confidentially as part of his effort to “seek healing and reconciliation for those who have been harmed.”

In a pastoral letter read today after services in the diocese’s 34 churches, the Rt. Rev. Sean Rowe, 35, said he has learned of four credible allegations of sexual abuse committed by Donald Davis, who was bishop of the diocese from 1974 to 1991. The four cases occurred in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Rowe said one of the victims contacted him in late March, and that he immediately began an investigation that unearthed information on three previous cases.

“Sexual abuse in any form is abhorrent in any community, and as your bishop, I feel particular pain that one of my predecessors betrayed the trust and innocence of children,” Rowe said. “On behalf of the church, I offer an abject apology to Bishop Davis’ victims, their families, and everyone whose trust in the church has been violated, and I ask for your forgiveness.”

Some of the cases had been known to some national church authorities, but had never been made public.

As part of the resolution of those cases, Davis resigned from the Episcopal Church’s House of Bishops in 1994 at the request of then-Presiding Bishop Edmund Browning. Davis, then living in retirement in Sarasota, Fl., agreed to refrain from priestly or episcopal duties. He also helped pay for counseling for two of the victims. Davis died in 2007.

“The existence of four victims makes it possible that there are others, and we are bound as Christians to seek their healing,” Rowe said.

Rowe, who became bishop of the diocese in September 2007, is the youngest bishop in the Church. He said he did not know why church leaders in the past handled this situation the way they did, though he knew that several of the victims specifically asked that their situations not be made public. Bishop Rowe’s immediate predecessor, the Rt. Rev. Robert Rowley, died in January.

“If allegations of sexual abuse involving children against a living member of the clergy surfaced today, we would immediately contact civil authorities and begin canon law processes,” Rowe said.

“Our churches must be places where children are nurtured and respected and cared for and never harmed or abused in any way,” he added. “I regret deeply that this has not always been the case in the Diocese of Northwestern Pennsylvania. As your bishop, I will do everything in my power to make sure that we seek God’s healing and reconciliation for the women Bishop Davis abused when they were girls and that nothing like this ever happens again in our diocese.”

The complete text of Bishop Rowe’s pastoral letter is available at www.dionwpa.org. Women who may have been abused by Bishop Davis can contact Bishop Rowe confidentially by calling 814-456-4203 or emailing bishop@dionwpa.org.

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