

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ:

I have news that will be difficult and disturbing for all of us in the Diocese of Northwestern Pennsylvania. Within the past three months, I have learned about four women who have made credible allegations that, as girls, they were sexually abused by the late Bishop Donald Davis. Davis was bishop of our diocese from 1974 until 1991. Two of the girls were abused at our diocesan summer camp and the other two were abused repeatedly over time.

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. 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.

I cannot undo the grievous wrongs that Bishop Davis has done, nor take away the pain of his victims, but I can do my best to ensure that, from now on, this diocese will tell the truth and seek healing and reconciliation for those who have been harmed. That is why I am making this situation public and asking anyone else who may have been abused by Bishop Davis to come forward, publicly or confidentially, to me. The existence of four victims makes it possible that there are others, and we are bound as Christians to seek their healing. We are working closely with the Office of the Presiding Bishop to do so. I have talked directly with Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori, and she supports my decision to speak with you about these matters.

I had no idea that Bishop Davis abused girls until I received a phone call on March 30, 2010 from a woman who was abused sometime between 1978 and 1980. I immediately began an investigation, and during that investigation, I learned of three other victims who had come forward in the past. I now know those victims' identities and that they wish to remain anonymous. I have learned that Bishop Robert Rowley, my predecessor, was aware of incidents of abuse as early as 1993 and reported them to the Office of the Presiding Bishop. My investigation also shows that Bishop Rowley met with victims and assisted in arranging counseling. As you may know, Bishop Rowley died in January of this year, just before I learned of this situation.

In early 1994, Presiding Bishop Edmond Browning asked Bishop Davis to resign from the House of Bishops, in which bishops retain their membership even if retired; to refrain from any priestly or episcopal duties; to undergo pastoral counseling; and to see a psychiatrist. In assenting, he was effectively removed as a bishop of the church. However, his abuse was not made public.

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. I do not know why church leaders in the past handled this situation the way they did, though I know that several of the victims specifically asked that their situations not be made public.

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. Our diocese had been working for more than a year to strengthen our misconduct policies and procedures when news of these past abuses came to light. The Diocese of Northwestern Pennsylvania is now a place where we make every effort to deal both responsibly and responsively with complaints and allegations of misconduct. We will make reports to the appropriate civil authorities when child abuse is suspected. All of our clergy, staff and volunteers who work with children are required to complete training called Safeguarding God's Children, and we are implementing a new misconduct policy, based on the model policy of the Church Pension Group.

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. 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.

Blessings,

The Rt. Rev. Sean Rowe
Bishop, Diocese of Northwestern Pennsylvania

Note to clergy: After reading the letter, please tell your congregation that anyone who wants to talk with Bishop Sean can call the diocesan office at 814-456-4203 or email bishop@dionwpa.org.