



Albany
Presbytery



REPORT

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VL

VESTRY LAIGHT

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Introduction

In April 2024, Albany Presbytery received a report of child sexual abuse that had occurred decades earlier. There have been few formally reported cases of sexual abuse in the presbytery, and this was the first case in memory involving a child victim. In the following months, Albany's efforts to follow the disciplinary process as set forth in the Book of Order revealed how ill-equipped they were to handle complicated sexual misconduct cases in an appropriate and sensitive manner.

The challenges the Investigating Committee ("IC") faced investigating the case led the presbytery to agree to conduct an independent examination of its policies and practices to determine how they could be better prepared to respond to complaints of sexual abuse—and in particular how to adopt survivor-centered and trauma-informed approaches. To that end, the Albany Presbytery retained Vestry Laight to undertake this assessment and formed an Administrative Commission ("AC") to oversee this investigation.

Getting the response right carries particular significance in a religious setting. Religious institutions are often considered safe spaces by their members and provide community. Coming forward with a complaint or concern in a religious setting requires courage from members who risk more than a job or livelihood by speaking out. As one expert told us, "A sense of belonging is at stake." With the spiritual component, the risk of coming forward may seem existential to a victim or third-party who suspects abuse. Even well-intended congregations can get this wrong – if someone who is respected or beloved by the congregation is implicated in sexual misconduct, congregants may be reluctant to believe the victim, minimize the harm, or push for grace or forgiveness.

Congregants may also face their own crisis of faith. As one stated clerk said about handling these cases, "What is it about us that creates the space for that to happen when it is so contrary to what we say about what we do?" He added, "For the congregation whose pastor was implicated in misconduct, it shattered beyond words its sense of identity – we are not who we say we are." Having systems in place to ensure that the church is acting in a way that is aligned with its faith will help minimize the risk of institutional betrayal, re-traumatization of victims, and help create a process that has the confidence of its members.

To identify gaps in processes and practices, Vestry Laight spoke to members of the Albany Presbytery, counsel at Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) ("PCUSA"), presbytery stated clerks and church leaders in other presbyteries who have participated in sexual abuse investigations, sexual abuse survivors, experts in child sex abuse and church practices, and advocates for survivors. We also reviewed presbytery and PCUSA policies and the Book of Order, case studies and reports from PCUSA and other religious institutions, and other relevant literature.



The objective of this report is to make recommendations to strengthen the presbytery’s policies and preparedness to prevent misconduct and to receive and handle disclosures of abuse or misconduct using a trauma-informed approach.¹ The report addresses the presbytery’s readiness to convene appropriately trained ICs, provide support for the victims and those impacted by the disclosure (including congregations, the accused, and IC members), and manage confidentiality and communication about the process and outcomes in an effective manner. The report also includes recommendations to strengthen accountability, transparency, and learning from these events.



“What is it about us that creates the space for that to happen when it is so contrary to what we say about what we do?”

— *Stated Clerk*

The report sets forth recommendations at a presbytery level for before, during, and after a disclosure is made. In addition, it reflects recommendations and observations about steps that could be taken at a regional and national level to strengthen PCUSA’s ability to respond to sexual misconduct using trauma-informed, survivor-centered approaches.² We have also supplied a curated list of resources at the end of this document to help guide those who may be confronted with this issue. Ideally, the recommendations will help other presbyteries that may

¹ A “trauma-informed approach”

- Understands trauma, its prevalence, and when it has likely occurred
- Recognizes the signs and impacts of trauma
- Integrates knowledge of trauma into policies, procedures, and practices
- Seeks to avoid re-traumatization and prioritizes physical, emotional, and spiritual safety
- Promotes trustworthiness, transparency, and clear communication
- Supports survivor choice, agency, and control wherever possible.

The definition used for this report is based on a blend of two well-established and widely-used definitions as well as our professional experience. It incorporates the 4 “Rs” (Realization of trauma, Recognition of signs of trauma, Response incorporating knowledge of trauma in policies and practice, and Resisting retraumatization), as outlined in the trauma-informed approach developed by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/resource-guide/samhsa_trauma.pdf. It also draws from the definition used by the Department of Justice Office for Victims of Crime, which is used more in investigative and accountability settings, rather than clinical or program environments. The key element from this definition is prioritizing the survivor’s feelings of safety, choice, and control. <https://ovc.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh226/files/model-standards/6/glossary.html>.

² A “survivor-centered” approach places the dignity, safety, wishes, rights, and well-being of survivors at the center of prevention, response, and accountability efforts. Core principles of this approach include

- Respect for survivor autonomy and agency
- Safety and protection from further harm
- Confidentiality and privacy
- Informed consent
- Non-discrimination
- Support for healing and recovery, including access to services
- Respect for survivors’ rights to seek remedies through formal and informal processes

The definition for this report is drawn substantially from the authoritative definition established by the UN Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), the highest-level humanitarian coordination forum of the UN system, https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/sites/default/files/migrated/2023-06/IASC%20Definition%20%26%20Principles%20of%20a%20Victim_Survivor%20Centered%20Approach.pdf



also struggle to manage these cases. However, the effectiveness of the recommendations will hinge on their implementation. Even the best-written policies are meaningless if they are not executed intentionally and with care.

Methodology

In preparation for this report, Vestry Laight conducted 32 interviews. Interviewees included six acting or retired presbytery stated clerks, seven participants in investigative processes (such as IC members or members of administrative commissions formed to investigate disclosures of sexual misconduct that fall outside of disciplinary processes), seven advocates for survivors or representatives of survivor advocacy groups, a trauma therapist, two PCUSA staff members, six experts in church handling of misconduct, three survivors of abuse in the Presbyterian Church and three survivors of sexual abuse in other denominations.

In preparing this report, we consulted frequently with Rev. James S. Evinger (Presbytery of Genesee Valley, Rochester, NY) who served as a valuable resource for history, background and context, and as a practitioner with expertise in intervention and prevention. Nisha Varia, an expert on trauma-informed survivor-centered investigations, also assisted with the research and preparation of this report. We also had a conversation with a member of the Advocacy Committee on Women and Gender Justice (ACWGJ).

Many of those we spoke to fit into more than one category – some experts are also advocates, for example, or a survivor may also be an expert or advocate. Interviewees included several people with various positions within the church, such as pastors and elders. Interviews were primarily conducted via videoconference call, though a small number were conducted in person. Some interviewees spoke to us on multiple occasions. To ensure candor and protect privacy, the identities of interviewees have been anonymized unless they explicitly requested otherwise.

Vestry Laight had hoped to interview more participants in disciplinary processes and, in particular, survivors, for this report to get their crucial perspectives on how processes impact them or factors they consider in deciding whether or not to come forward. To that end, a dedicated email address (albany@vestrylaight.com) was established and shared in multiple newsletters and emails sent to members of the Albany Presbytery. However, we were not successful in finding survivors through those channels.

There are many reasons why survivors may choose not to come forward, including that few people have brought formal complaints, and revisiting their experience may be retraumatizing; they may have concerns about confidentiality, or may have received an unsupportive response in the past and fear being judged or not believed. Many are likely unfamiliar with Vestry Laight



and our past work on this subject. In the church setting, they may be even more reluctant because raising concerns could lead to ostracism and put their membership in the church community at risk. It may also complicate their feelings about God and the church. Others may have left the church and be unaware that this assessment is taking place.

We did not feel it was appropriate to reach out directly to survivors for fear of reopening old wounds, and similarly we did not want presbytery leaders to reach out to survivors who had not given specific consent to be contacted, as we did not want survivors to feel pressure to participate. Those we spoke to were generally recommended by other interviewees, and we are grateful for their participation and insights.

In addition to interviews, Vestry Laight conducted desk research and reviewed presbytery policies, the Book of Order, proposed amendments to the Book of Order relating to sexual misconduct and related commentary, public investigative reports into sexual abuse at presbyteries and in missionary schools (the reports of the independent committees or commissions of inquiry), training material, materials provided by Rev. Evinger in relation to Albany Presbytery's response to the case and for background, internal correspondence, and relevant literature.

Many of the materials we reviewed center the work in authoritative spiritual sources. While that is beyond our expertise, several of the resources listed at the end of the report include a faith-based rationale for establishing a trauma-informed approach to handling sexual abuse cases. In addition, the analyses done by Rev. Evinger about the Albany case ("White Paper"), which will be published by Albany Presbytery with this report, address the faith-based aspects of recommendations.

Per presbytery policy, an Administrative Commission was formed to oversee the preparation of this report. The first meeting was held on January 14, 2026, and the commission met with Vestry Laight approximately once a month thereafter, primarily to discuss how to effectively conduct outreach about the report and to receive updates on the report's progress. The Administrative Commission did not receive a draft of the report, review it, or edit it prior to being presented with the final report; nor did they try to influence the research, though they did provide introductions and information upon request.

Prevention

Preventing sexual misconduct begins with a clear vision and commitment to fostering safe spaces and a violence-free community throughout the presbytery. Prevention is not only about policies and procedures, but about cultivating a culture in which power, boundaries, and safety are openly acknowledged and regularly discussed.

Our interviews highlighted that sexual misconduct and harassment can arise from a range of power dynamics, including the influence and charisma that pastors may hold within their con-



gregations, as well as from power imbalances between senior or entrenched members and younger leaders and congregants, particularly women, youth, and children. One former clerk felt that lack of oversight by the presbytery of someone who was seen as a “golden child” for his charisma and ability to bring in new members contributed to precipitating a problematic culture. Another interviewee discussed the challenges faced by young women clergy “being in these positions of leadership that congregations had never seen,” which created tension and sometimes led to harassment that was hard to report, even in progressive communities.

Creating regular opportunities for frank dialogue about power, culture, gender, ethnicity, age, professional boundaries, and appropriate safeguards helps to reduce the risk of harm, strengthen awareness, and reinforce shared accountability. These conversations also better equip the Presbytery to respond to concerns with sensitivity, competence, and care should a case arise, as discussed in the next section.



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Another critical component of prevention is ensuring that individuals feel empowered and supported to raise concerns, that complaints are addressed promptly and appropriately, and that lessons learned from reports, investigations, and outcomes are systematically captured, shared, and used to strengthen safeguarding practices. In this way, prevention becomes an ongoing process of learning, accountability, and community-building that contributes to a safer and more trustworthy church for all.

Preparedness for Cases

A presbytery’s attempts to be prepared to address sexual misconduct are set forth in its various policies relating to sexual abuse, child abuse and sexual boundaries, but there is often a disjunction between what the policies call for and what happens in practice. Preparedness to handle a claim of sexual abuse encompasses not only what teams of people will be designated to respond and the training received – but starts beforehand, as discussed above, with whether the presbytery has fostered a culture where a person would feel comfortable raising a concern and if so, would know how to do so.

It is not easy to find out how to raise a concern on Albany Presbytery’s website. After navigat-



ing through different pages, buttons and documents, a person may land upon the “Anti-Harassment, Sexual Misconduct & Child Safety Policies,” but still come away not knowing what to expect, or having been reassured that the presbytery will implement a survivor-centered, trauma-informed process -- because it doesn’t say that it will. As Rev. Evinger notes in his White Paper, the “tone and style of the Policy honor that of the Book of Order – legalistic and impersonal in ways indifferent to what promotes engagement, rapport or trust.”

That contrasts with the caring institution Albany Presbytery aspires to be. For presbyteries who desire to be better at responding to sexual abuse, they need to create the preconditions that enable the community to recognize it, prevent it and address it. Education is crucial, not only for the leadership, but also for the entire congregation, so that there is a shared congregational understanding of what abuse is.

Experts and former IC members recommend on-boarding new members and sermons as opportunities to engage in these topics. “It is one way to make your parish more trauma-informed.” It also helps to educate on microaggressions – recognizing and stopping microaggressions (and indicators like boundary testing) early can prevent abuse later. A critical component of the education is centering survivors’ voices -- and doing so when *not* in crisis. One expert also cautioned that when the church hears from a survivor, they need to understand themselves not as the “saviors” but as the “humble recipients of knowledge.”

Presbyteries should make it easy to find information and to disclose misconduct. A stated clerk shared that “we do not have a process to encourage people to come forward.” The 2024 report of the Administrative Commission Investigation of Mr. Jud Hendrix (the “Mid-Kentucky Investigation”) recommends adding a page on the Mid-Kentucky website on which people can “find easily understood information on how to report sexual misconduct.” Another pastor recommends a button on the front page of the website (“you should be able to click a button to make a report”) as well as including a list of stated clerks because “if you’re just someone who sits in the pews you’re not necessarily [knowledgeable about structures in] the institution.”

In addition, more information should be shared about the possibility of an AC to conduct an investigation outside the judicial process under Book of Order provision G-3.0109(b)(6). One retired stated clerk who helped with an AC says he “feels like this [Book of Order] provision should be posted in big red letters in presbyteries as it stops perpetrators from getting away with crimes and allows the administration to uncover the truth.” The website should be a place to reiterate the commitment to a church that is a safe and sacred space – and how the church protects the congregation.

In anticipation of receiving complaints, some presbytery policies, including Albany’s, call for the formation of a Response Team. Albany’s Response Team is supposed to ensure that “an expeditious, professional, confidential, and caring response is made by the presbytery to



charges of sexual misconduct.” It is to be comprised of clergy and lay persons with “a range of professional expertise, including ... pastoral counseling/therapy, law, clergy serving in a parish, interim ministry, conflict resolution, personnel management and training and child advocacy.” But, as Rev. Evinger’s White Paper shows, no response team was appointed prior to the 2024 matter despite having a policy at the time that required one. A team was subsequently appointed and is now in place and active.

This gap between policy and practice is not unique to Albany. A stated clerk from another presbytery had a policy for a special response team but it was never implemented; it existed on paper “to cover the presbytery’s ass.” The current presbytery served by one interviewee is a “hot mess. We don’t have a response team.” Another stated clerk also commented that, “In theory we have a team, but in practice it is hard.” A presbytery administrator knew they had a Sexual Misconduct Response Team but didn’t know if it was effective. As one interviewee concluded, “policy without execution is dead weight.”



“In theory we have a team, but in practice it is hard.”

— *Stated Clerk*

Despite the challenges in assembling response teams or ICs, several clerks and IC members reported positive outcomes. One stated clerk had updated his IC policy a few years before and had a plan sketched out; when it was tested with a case, he was able to implement it quickly, recruiting people with relevant experience. The team then divided responsibility for pastoral care between themselves, with some providing pastoral care and resources for the survivors and others assigned to support the accused and the congregation, a practice they found effective. The Mid-Kentucky Presbytery assembled a team with experience working with trauma survivors and child sexual abuse as well as professional experience as counselors, clergy and lawyers. A person involved said, “an anchor to our strong process was having a very good team.” Being part of a large presbytery with a “very strong pool” to choose from made that easier, though it still took them several weeks to find members.

Others spoke of the challenges of assembling teams in smaller, more rural presbyteries, or when special skills are required. When looking for an interpreter who understood the polity, a member found that “all the pastoral leaders are connected. That made it really hard to find someone who could be helpful and who didn’t know the accused.” In smaller communities,



having a standing team may not make sense when “cases do not come up that often.”

Given the highly relational nature of the Presbyterian Church, regardless of whether the area served by the presbytery is small or large, everyone is connected. It’s not “possible to have a team that has no connection with what’s going on.” Another AC member asked, “how can it appear impartial?” in smaller presbyteries where everyone knows each other. Multiple interviewees acknowledged challenges posed by committee members knowing the accused.



“An anchor to our strong process was having a very good team.”

— *Administrative Commission Member*

Having stated clerks choose committee members also creates tricky waters and potential conflicts to navigate: “Stated clerks can have vested interests. It’s hard to provide pastoral support to victim or accused and manage church interests and processes ... They’re not in tune with the emotional side of things. They are looking at the Book of Order and [how to follow] the judicial process.”

Training for response teams and committees was also highly variable. Due to the decentralized nature of PCUSA, there is no prescribed, approved trauma-informed training to be utilized. The Mid-Kentucky AC, as indicated in its report, incorporated the manual *Responding to Spiritual Leader Misconduct: A Handbook* in its work, and consulted with the organization Into Account to confer a trauma-informed perspective to its investigation. By contrast, another AC acknowledged they did not receive training and relied upon conferring amongst themselves.

To ensure a robust, ethical, and fair process that avoids retraumatizing survivors, consistency in training and – and minimum standards of being trauma-informed – are important. The Presbytery of Philadelphia’s [Policy on Ethics of Sexual Boundaries](#) (2021), for example, mandates that its standing Sexual Misconduct and Abuse Response Team will receive “annual education and training that includes a trauma-informed response in the care of victims, congregations and others impacted by the abuse.”

“Don’t wait until there is an emergency to get prepared,” advised one stated clerk. Several experts advised on the importance of training and engagement with survivor perspectives when not in crisis – and before defenses are triggered. Church leaders, key volunteers, and response team members need training in understanding what trauma looks like and recognizing differ-



ent forms of abuse. This muscle should be developed beforehand through training and careful use of case studies to help them work through their own fears and defenses before being confronted with a crisis.

As one expert recommended, church members should approach with a learning mindset, regarding survivors “as the source of wisdom and as your guide.” Reading survivor stories, according to another expert, “helps to humanize the variety and diversity of experience and helps put a face to the issue.” Training is also not a “one and done” situation. The ACWGJ proposal to the 2026 General Assembly for the survivor support team intentionally calls for *continued* mandatory training for members of the survivor support team to support continuous learning and the most up-to-date knowledge.



“Don’t wait until there is an emergency to get prepared.”

— *Stated Clerk*

Recommendations

Build a Safe, Survivor-Centered, Trauma-Informed Ministry Culture

- Commitment and Values
 - Publicly affirm a commitment to creating a safe ministry where all are treated with dignity and respect, where violence and sexual misconduct are not tolerated, and where responses to concerns are survivor-centered and trauma-informed
 - Infuse these principles into presbytery life, leadership and decision-making
 - Prominently include this commitment on the presbytery website and in key communications
- Education and Prevention
 - Provide ongoing education for clergy, employees, key volunteers and the congregation through refresher training, and in on-boarding materials, and sermons
 - Incorporate discussions of healthy boundaries and misconduct prevention as part of leadership development
 - Ensure boundary training is practical, engaging and informed by survivor perspectives



- o Partner with survivor advocacy and prevention organizations where appropriate
- o Create spaces to discuss topics and issues that emerge around power and culture, including those around gender, age, race, ethnicity, disability, and sexual orientation, among others

Reporting and Support Systems

- Expand Disclosure and Consultation Options
 - o Provide clear, easily accessible information about how to report concerns, ask questions, offer relevant suggestions, or make formal complaints about misconduct or abuse on the presbytery website
 - o Offer easily accessible online reporting options
 - o Provide anonymous reporting mechanisms
 - o Train designated individuals to receive disclosures and consultation requests in a trauma-informed manner
 - o Include easily accessible information on what disclosure, e.g., submitting a report, entails, what to expect from the process and available support resources
- Communication and Awareness
 - o Raise awareness on a regular basis among congregations and communities about these multiple disclosure channels, available support resources, and where to find information about the process
 - o Adopt and communicate guiding principles for responding to disclosures, including a commitment to “do no further harm”
- Support for the Person Harmed and Others Impacted
 - o Maintain an up-to-date list of local counseling, advocacy and support resources
 - o Offer financial support for counseling (of the survivor’s choice) and an independent advocate when appropriate
 - o Ensure pastoral care resources are available for survivors, congregations and others affected by misconduct

Response Teams and Investigative Capacity

- Preparedness
 - o Designate and train process support people who can confidentially answer questions for people who are deciding whether to report without triggering an investigation and formal judicial proceedings
 - o Maintain a pool of trained potential Investigating Committee members BEFORE



- o they are needed
 - o Establish selection criteria addressing expertise (for example, legal, child welfare, counseling), diversity, cultural competency, language skills and trauma-informed practice
 - o Clearly communicate expected responsibilities and time commitments
- Training for Response Team and IC Members
 - o Provide annual, live, interactive training
 - o Ensure the curriculum includes guidance on trauma-informed approaches and interviewing, survivor-centered practices and cultural sensitivity as relevant
 - o Center survivor perspectives, by familiarizing members with survivor accounts from advocacy organizations and case studies
 - o Utilize external subject matter experts where appropriate (e.g., experts from a child advocacy center or survivor support organization)
 - o Ensure the curriculum addresses self-care and organizational duty of care for those responding to disclosures and formal complaints

Investigative Process

This section addresses how presbyteries can ground their response to sexual misconduct with trauma-informed and survivor-centered approaches. We use the following definitions:

A survivor-centered approach places the dignity, safety, wishes, rights, and well-being of survivors at the center of prevention, response, and accountability efforts.

Core principles of this approach include:

- Respect for survivor autonomy and agency
- Safety and protection from further harm
- Confidentiality and privacy
- Informed consent
- Non-discrimination
- Support for healing and recovery, including access to services
- Respect for survivors' rights to seek remedies through formal and informal processes

A trauma-informed approach:

- Understands trauma, its prevalence, and when it has likely occurred
- Recognizes the signs and impacts of trauma
- Integrates knowledge of trauma into policies, procedures, and practices
- Seeks to avoid re-traumatization and prioritizes physical, emotional, and spiritual safety



- Promotes trustworthiness, transparency, and clear communication
- Supports survivor choice, agency, and control wherever possible.

In practice, a trauma-informed approach emphasizes safety, trustworthiness, transparency, survivor agency, and efforts to minimize the risk of re-traumatization throughout the reporting, support, investigative, and decision-making processes.

A holistic response addresses the fact that many people may be affected by allegations of misconduct and the processes around an investigation, including survivors, witnesses, family members, presbytery and church leaders, congregations, and the accused.

Interviewees repeatedly emphasized that the church's response should be grounded in dignity, care for God's children, safety, and accountability rather than primarily in concerns about institutional liability. As one advocate explained, "There is less trauma if there is not institutional betrayal following the abuse."



“There is less trauma if there is not institutional betrayal following the abuse.”

— Survivor Advocate

Receiving a Disclosure

Learning about sexual misconduct should and can occur through multiple channels, such as a disclosure by the survivor, a family member, or other third-party. Knowledge about a case can happen, for example, through in-person conversations, reporting through hotlines or online communications, or via a complaint filed with the police. Presbyteries should be equipped to respond to complaints that come from within the denomination as well as those from outside the church.

Those receiving complaints should recognize that disclosures often occur in the context of fear, vulnerability, and profound personal risk. The initial response to a disclosure can have a profound impact on the survivor or person making the complaint.

As discussed in the Prevention section, church and presbytery leaders, response teams, and key volunteers should be trained in trauma-informed responses before a complaint arises. Training and refreshers should occur regularly and not only in the context of an active case. Such preparation helps ensure both that survivors receive a supportive, appropriate response



and that those receiving disclosures are equipped to handle their responsibilities sensitively and competently.

A trauma-informed response involves understanding the risks that many people must navigate in coming forward. Survivors may fear not being believed, being judged, losing employment or housing, damaging important relationships, or experiencing retaliation. Some may not label what happened as abuse or misconduct. For some, disclosure is complicated by their relationship with the church or with God. Children may have been groomed, manipulated, or threatened into silence. These realities should shape how trained response teams respond.

Experiencing trauma means a person has experienced overwhelming events in which they have often lost control over their body, choices, or environment. Minimizing the risk of re-traumatization involves recognizing and avoiding triggers, including the feeling of not being in control, especially over one's story and retelling of experiences.

In some instances, the person harmed may not want to participate in or initiate church disciplinary proceedings. This can be a challenge for institutions that must also consider community safety. Respect for survivor choice and well-being is extremely important. In such cases, the church should examine the risk of ongoing, future, and other past harms by the perpetrator and ways to proceed without the victim's participation and without disclosing confidential information.

Best practice and the perspectives of interviewees emphasize the importance of listening carefully, responding compassionately, and creating space for survivors to exercise choice and control in the disclosure process to the extent possible—for example, what they share, to whom, where, and whether a support person is present and with whom information will be shared.

One interviewee who works with sexual abuse survivors suggested beginning with simple but meaningful actions: “believe them; say sorry; offer to meet in a neutral space like a coffee shop rather than church premises.” Another described conducting interviews at a counseling center that was separate from the church because of the impact abuse had on survivors' feelings about church spaces.

When a complaint is reported by someone other than the survivor, the presbytery still has a responsibility to act. At the same time, leaders should understand and respect the survivor's wishes, including the level of desired participation. An important objective is to understand what the survivor wants from the presbytery's response.

Prioritize Safety and Support

Once a presbytery has received a disclosure, immediate attention should be given to safety concerns. Interviewed experts stressed the importance of assessing any ongoing contact



between the survivor and the accused and implementing safeguards where necessary. This includes advising the accused not to contact the survivor and not to have third parties contact the survivor. If the accused is a church leader, employee, or volunteer, it may involve putting them on administrative leave.

Putting safeguards in place is particularly important and time-sensitive when children or other vulnerable individuals may be at risk. A trauma-informed response is not solely concerned with investigating past harm; it must also prevent further harm from occurring.

While New York State does not require clergy to be mandatory reporters, it is our strong recommendation that all presbyteries adopt this practice and require clergy and employees to report sexual abuse involving minors and other victims who may be especially vulnerable to civil legal authorities. Abuse in New York State involving children should be reported to the hotline operated by the New York Statewide Central Register of Child Abuse and Maltreatment.

Retaliation is a form of harassment, and violators should be held accountable. This is discussed further in the policy section below. Retaliation can come from the accused, members of the congregation, or other third parties. Expectations around respect and privacy around the complaint and the related response process should be reinforced.

As part of the support process, survivors should know who is advocating for them, whom they can contact with questions, and who will help them navigate the process. This information and support should be available to all survivors, whether they are members of the presbytery or from the broader community. Presbyteries should have up-to-date referral resources available, including counseling, health services, and other forms of support. Interviewees noted the importance of developing these referral networks before a case arises and ensuring that they reflect linguistic, cultural, ethnic, and gender diversity.

Survivors should have the opportunity to choose a support person/support people who can accompany them throughout the process. This person may come from inside or outside the presbytery. Indeed, one pastor stressed a preference for having an advocate from outside the church, because survivors need strong advocates who prioritize their needs above the interests of the institution. The ability to choose who provides support is an important aspect of restoring agency and control. When the survivor needs assistance finding an advocate or support person, the presbytery or their networked resources should help. For example, one presbytery connected a survivor with a bilingual counselor trained in trauma-informed response.

Respect Privacy While Preserving Agency

Information should generally be shared only on a need-to-know basis, limited to those who require it to provide support or carry out the response or investigative process. Those involved



in handling sensitive and confidential information should exercise due diligence in the secure physical and digital storage and transfer of any file.

The response team should discuss confidentiality and privacy preferences with survivors early in the process and ensure that all involved have a clear understanding of what information is shared, with whom and when, how it will be retained, who will have access to the file, and that the survivor's wishes have been prioritized. Survivors should receive clear explanations of the process and their rights.

Communicate Clearly and Consistently

Clear and consistent information builds trust and transparency. Interviewees repeatedly described how uncertainty, silence, and inconsistent follow-through create stress for survivors and others affected by a complaint.

Presbyteries should establish clear expectations about communication from the beginning. Survivors should know whom their point of contact is, how updates will be provided, and how frequently communication can be expected. Even when there is little new information to report, regular contact helps build trust and reduces anxiety.

Communication is critical for all stakeholders. Congregations are often aware that something has happened long before a formal process concludes. Interviewees noted that explaining confidentiality requirements while maintaining trust can be one of the most difficult aspects of responding to misconduct. One participant described congregational communication as “the hardest nut to crack when we’ve been asked for help.” Congregations may need regular updates about the process, explanations about why certain information cannot be shared, and support for members who are struggling with what they have learned. One interviewee cited poor communication about an initial investigative process as the reason for later problems with the congregation since they did not understand why the pastor was leaving.

Interviewees described several different approaches they took to communication with stakeholders. To help the congregation understand the process, one clerk told us he went to the impacted church “In person for 15-minute appointments with anyone who wanted to talk about the process and let them yell at me if needed.” He felt it was important to address the passions at the moment and to be the face of the presbytery. He also hired a congregational consultant to help the congregation move forward.

Several interviewees described the value of having someone specifically accompany the congregation through the process, such as an interim pastor or other trusted leader. Positive examples included regular meetings with congregational leaders and thoughtful planning regarding the timing and pace of information shared with the congregation. In one case, an Administrative Commission investigating sexual abuse maintained close contact with the



impacted congregation throughout the investigation. Every week they met with the congregation's pastor about the progress of the investigation and felt that "100 percent buy-in from the congregation was key" to its success and a priority.

Establish Clear Roles and Accountability

Interviewees repeatedly stressed the importance of clarity regarding responsibilities. Everyone involved should know who is responsible for supporting the survivor, communicating with the accused, answering questions, communicating with the congregation, and overseeing the process. Uncertainty about roles can create confusion, delays, and additional distress.

Best practice and several interviewees underlined the importance of separating pastoral care from investigative responsibilities. The person responsible for procedural oversight should not also be the primary source of pastoral support. This helps avoid conflict of interests and ensures that both functions receive the attention they require.

Support Those Carrying Out the Response

A holistic and trauma-informed response recognizes that a disclosure of sexual misconduct and the ensuing response affect many different parties. Clerks, pastors, response team members, investigating committee members, PJC members and others frequently encounter difficult stories, conflict, large time commitments and significant emotional pressure. Interviewees described the work as "really heavy" and "so stressful." One IC member said, "Emotionally and spiritually we were really on our own." One participant reflected that "humans are at heart of who is holding the work, along with those sharing their stories. It's important to make sure they have outlets. There is a lot of vicarious trauma."

Presbyteries should ensure that those carrying out these responsibilities have access to mental health resources, regular check-ins from the leader who convened their participation, appropriate orientation to their responsibilities, additional training, and opportunities to connect with others who have previously undertaken similar work. All of the interviewees who spoke on this subject recommended that funding for therapists be made available, especially for therapists outside the presbytery, as a critical resource. Interviewees also recommended regular communication among committee members to process what they are hearing and support one another through difficult stages of the work.

As one interviewee who had held senior roles in PCUSA described, the process was "the most emotionally difficult thing I have done for the church." She also remained focused on what she saw as the central purpose of the work: "The whole point is having survivors listened to by the church."



Recommendations

Response Teams and Investigative Capacity

- Receiving Disclosures and Initiating a Response
 - Offer safe, private, comfortable settings to discuss the disclosure or answer questions, recognizing that outside of church premises may be preferable
 - Respect the survivor's wellbeing and wishes, provide information about available support services and information around formal complaints, including expectations around communication, point people, processes and timelines
 - Respect the survivor's choice of a support person and help provide one if needed
 - Establish immediate safety measures as needed, for example, communicating with the accused to establish clear no-contact expectations with the survivor, using administrative leave as appropriate and developing safety plans
 - Share a description of the allegation with the accused, their ability to have a support person and information about the process, including communication, process, point people and timelines
 - Advise the accused on any interim administrative and safety measures, including no-contact expectations, prohibitions on retaliation and the consequences that will flow from violations
 - Respect fully a survivor's choice in whether they wish to participate in a formal complaint, investigation or disciplinary process.
 - If a survivor does not wish to pursue a formal investigation, the church has a responsibility toward community safety and should consider the risk of ongoing harm and other past harms by the accused and ways to proceed without the victim's participation and without disclosing confidential information
 - Ensure confidentiality and privacy throughout the process, sharing information only as needed for carrying out the investigation, supporting the survivor or for safety reasons, and using robust safeguards in the storage and handling of physical and digital information

- Support for Those Carrying out the Response
 - Ensure that those responding to complaints, including point people facilitating disclosures, response teams, IC members, PJC members, stated clerks and others carrying out related responsibilities have access to mental health resources, including therapists from outside the denomination.
 - Provide those responding to sexual misconduct with appropriate orientation to their responsibilities, additional training, regular check-ins from the leader who



convened their participation and opportunities to connect with others who have previously undertaken similar work.

Post Process

It is important that findings of investigations are communicated effectively and sensitively to participants and the impacted congregation. Follow-up care for the parties involved, including communication with the congregation and a plan for ensuring there is no retaliation after the case is closed, should be more than an afterthought. To the extent possible, it is also important to allow victims to control what information is shared to prevent further harm and help ensure their ownership of the process. Sharing the outcome of the case appropriately may also help ensure that perpetrators of misconduct are not able to go to other jurisdictions and commit abuse again.

Sexual abuse cases, as discussed, take an enormous toll on the parties involved. While there are polity requirements around sharing information once censure is imposed, a thoughtful approach about sharing findings, including information about non-confidential investigations (such as Administrative Commissions investigations) is important so that the process is seen and accepted as fair by all involved.

For those who have come forward or participated in investigations, follow-up communication is essential to ensure there is no retaliation or other fallout after the proceedings. Affirmative follow up is necessary because those who experience retaliation after reporting may be intimidated and reluctant to come forward again. Retaliation could take many forms, including abuse on social media or ostracism from the church community. Actively working to prevent and monitor for retaliation is important to minimize harm, and so that others will feel safe coming forward. Fear of retaliation often silences victims and discourages reporting.

In cases where disciplinary processes have not been completed, we learned of creative ways clerks and pastors found to help with healing. In a case where the pastor renounced jurisdiction before the investigation concluded, the clerk arranged for a gathering of survivors and IC and PJC members in which the survivors were given time to share what had happened to them. The clerk felt the survivors appreciated the opportunity to externalize their story and have the church acknowledge their experience, even though the perpetrator was not formally disciplined.

In other abuse cases, the leaders of the AC scheduled special sessions for the perpetrator's former congregation and gave members an opportunity to ask questions. Elsewhere pastors ensured therapists were on site when the investigative report was published or held a dedicated service after a meeting in which the report was discussed. In contrast, a lack of clear information about how decisions were made and technical processes can lead some to question



the fairness of the proceedings and leave lingering doubts.

Recommendations

At the conclusion of an investigation process:

- Have a communication plan in place to share findings in a supportive manner with the parties and allow congregation members the opportunity to ask questions
- Consult with the survivor on what information is shared, how it is shared, when and by whom. Respect their wishes to the fullest extent possible
- Follow up with the parties to ensure they do not experience retaliation in the aftermath of the process
- Debrief with participants to discuss the process and determine what went well and where there are areas for improvement for future handling of complaints

Albany Presbytery Policy

Albany Presbytery's current anti-harassment, sexual misconduct, and child protection policies—available via the resources page on the presbytery's website—provide a foundation for preventing harm, responding to complaints, and promoting accountability. The policies clearly state that abuse, harassment, and sexual misconduct are inconsistent with Christian faith and community and establish procedures for addressing allegations when they arise.

The current policy provides information on processes to investigate a complaint, the types of committees that may be constituted, their responsibility, and potential outcomes.

The following recommendations build upon the existing framework by centering the policies in survivor-centered and trauma-informed approaches and strengthening prevention and organizational learning. They also reflect the feedback gathered in interviews, as discussed above, about how to improve response to sexual misconduct complaints.

Survivor-Centered and Trauma-Informed Approaches

One theme that emerged repeatedly during interviews is ensuring that survivors experience the church's response as supportive, compassionate, and focused on their well-being. While policies necessarily address reporting, investigations, and accountability processes, survivors often encounter these at moments of profound vulnerability.

A survivor-centered approach places the dignity, safety, wishes, rights, and well-being of survivors at the center of the church's response. A trauma-informed approach recognizes the impact of trauma, seeks to avoid re-traumatization, and prioritizes restoring safety, agency and choice. It also recognizes that survivors' needs may evolve over time or may change depending on whether the church's reaction is supportive or dismissive or hostile.





A trauma-informed approach recognizes the impact of trauma, seeks to avoid re-traumatization, and prioritizes restoring safety, agency and choice.

The current policy can better align with these values by including clear and strong guidance and commitments. Greater clarity should be provided regarding the support available to survivors, complainants, witnesses and others affected by misconduct.

Suggested policy revisions:

- An explicit commitment to treating survivors with dignity, compassion and respect throughout the process and to using survivor-centered, trauma-informed approaches in response to misconduct
- Clearer explanation of rights of victims who are not complainants
- Clear descriptions of available support resources for all parties
- A requirement to research and update regularly referrals and support services in order to be prepared for disclosures and complaints as they arise
- Encouragement for survivors, complainants and key witnesses to choose support persons who can accompany them through the process, and presbytery support to identify and provide a support person if needed, including, if necessary, a paid advocate from outside the presbytery
- Language emphasizing survivor choice and agency while adhering to legal and ecclesiastical obligations
- Update the definition of rape in the policy to include nonconsensual sexual acts proscribed by federal, tribal, or state law, when the victim lacks capacity to consent

Prevention

Best practice calls for, and many experts interviewed for this report emphasized, the need for broader education regarding healthy boundaries, power dynamics, and reporting mechanisms. Prevention is most effective when expectations are embedded into the life of congregations. As one pastor described, a bad actor can lead a congregation to distrust the presbytery as part of a grooming process. Without further education and clear expectations, you may be in a situation where the members “have no idea how bad the culture was” and no concept of “grooming.”

The presbytery’s policy should directly address prevention in its policy through provisions on



education and awareness initiatives, including:

- Ensure the required boundary training for clergy, employees, and key volunteers is engaging and practical and incorporates survivor perspectives
- Regular refresher training
- Orientation materials for ministry leaders and key volunteers
- Discussions of healthy boundaries and misconduct prevention as part of leadership development
- Regular awareness-raising among congregations and communities regarding reporting procedures and available resources
- Integration of discussion of boundaries, trauma awareness, and reporting mechanisms into sermons

The policy on child safety has several useful screening practices that can be expanded to adults as well. Screening practices for clergy, employees, and key volunteers, should include but not be limited to background checks, which are limited in scope. For example, screening practices should also include robust reference checks and interviews.

Accessible Reporting

Even the strongest policy cannot be effective if individuals do not know how to seek help or share concerns.

Individuals who have experienced misconduct often spend significant time deciding whether to come forward. During that period, they may be seeking information, exploring options, or simply trying to understand what support is available.

The presbytery policy should expand the number of pathways available for disclosing misconduct and consultation. These could include:

- Clear information prominently displayed on the presbytery website explaining options for disclosing misconduct
- Online reporting and disclosure options
- Volunteers and designated point people trained to receive complaints and inquiries
- Anonymous reporting mechanisms
- Easily accessible information on what submitting a report or disclosure entails, what to expect from the process, and available support resources

Ombudsperson

As discussed further below, the presbytery should strongly consider, whether at a presbytery or synod level, the creation of an ombudsperson. Many individuals are not always ready to



make a formal report when they first seek help. An ombudsperson with relevant training and experience could provide confidential guidance, answer questions, explain options, and help individuals understand available processes before they decide whether to proceed with a complaint.

Such a role would not replace formal reporting requirements. Rather, it would create a supportive point of entry into the system for individuals who are uncertain about next steps.

Albany Presbytery currently has in place a provision for a Process Support Person who is intended to provide support and emotional and physical presence to the victim and their family, the accused, their family and the congregation. Part of their role is to provide clarification of the investigative process and judicial proceedings and inform the party they are assigned to support their rights. However process support people are not designated or trained in advance. If they were, they could also potentially serve the role of a quasi-ombuds and be a resource for people who are deciding whether or not to file a complaint without automatically triggering a formal investigation.

Clarified Reporting Requirements

The distinction between legal reporting requirements, denominational responsibilities, and institutional expectations is not always well understood. The Book of Order (G-4.03) provisions on confidentiality are unclear on what responsibilities leaders have with regard to disclosure. While G-4.0301 states that “Confidentiality should not be an excuse to hold secret the knowledge or risk of harm especially when related to the physical abuse, neglect, sexual abuse of a minor or an adult who lacks mental capacity,” the provision generally stresses the importance of confidentiality with narrow and not clearly defined exceptions, such as when there is a risk of “imminent bodily harm.”

Likewise, section G-4.0302 seems to limit mandatory reporting to certain circumstances such as when information is gained outside of a protected confidential communication and when there is a risk of “future physical harm or abuse” (as opposed to imminent bodily harm in the previous section). The conflicting signals about the importance of keeping confidentiality along with the latitude for assessing risk and the unclear definition of confidentiality could discourage people from reporting misconduct. As a result, uncertainty can arise regarding the obligation to report concerns to civil legal authorities, including in cases of suspected or reported child sexual abuse. The policy should provide clarity and remove any uncertainty that could lead to underreporting abusive behavior or warning signs.

The policy is a useful place to clarify:

- Legal mandatory reporting requirements
- Internal policy and expectations. While New York State does not require clergy to



be mandatory reporters, it our strong recommendation that all presbyteries adopt this practice and require clergy and employees to report to civil legal authorities sexual abuse involving minors and other victims who may be especially vulnerable

Ethical Expectations for Leaders

While misconduct policies define prohibited conduct, a code of ethics provides positive guidance regarding professional behavior and healthy ministry practices. Such a document can help create shared expectations regarding:

- Professional boundaries
- Appropriate use of authority
- Respectful conduct
- Confidentiality
- Conflicts of interest
- Reporting responsibilities

PCUSA currently has several [codes of ethical conduct](#). However, there does not seem to be widespread awareness or dissemination of these standards. These include the Standards of Ethical Conduct for Members of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.); Standards of Ethical Conduct for Employees and Volunteers of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and Standards of Ethical Conduct for Ordained Officers in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

We recommend the presbytery:

- Circulate and raise awareness of and adherence to the Standards of Ethical Conduct for Members of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.); Standards of Ethical Conduct for Employees and Volunteers of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and Standards of Ethical Conduct for Ordained Officers in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

Protections against Retaliation

The current Albany Presbytery Anti-Harassment Policy prohibits retaliation in response to lodging a complaint, appearing as a witness in an investigation, or serving as an investigator. The policy should be expanded to encompass the full range of potential situations as follows:

- The policy should expand the protections against retaliation to ensure that retaliation in response to a disclosure, even if it does not result in a formal complaint is also prohibited, and that the protections extend to others impacted, such as those on the response team who may not be investigators, but are providing support and care



Transparency and Accountability

The policy currently has information on situations in which investigations are taking place but not yet concluded. This is a section that can benefit from periodic review based on lessons learned to refine and improve its effectiveness. Relevant guidance includes elaboration of interim safety measures, temporary removal of the accused from ministry responsibilities, and appropriate communication with affected congregations while respecting the privacy needs of the case.

These situations require balancing confidentiality, a fair process, congregational trust, and community safety. More detailed policy guidance could assist church leaders in navigating these multiple responsibilities.

The policy should also set out pathways for accountability, for example when a respondent leaves ministry, renounces jurisdiction, retires, or dies before disciplinary proceedings conclude. This includes raising awareness about additional administrative mechanisms that are available, such as truth-seeking commissions. Often people are unaware of the possibility of a non-judicial process. One interviewee said she was initially told by leaders in her presbytery that “there was nothing they could do” after the pastor accused of misconduct renounced jurisdiction, though she eventually learned about the AC process and helped to create one.

Healing, Redress, and Restoration

Survivors often continue to live with the consequences of misconduct long after formal processes end. Congregations may likewise experience lasting impacts that require attention and care.

We recommend the presbytery policy address:

- Additional support after an investigation and disciplinary process has concluded for survivors (including those outside the church), witnesses, those who handled the process, and affected communities
- Accompaniment of a congregation healing from harm
- Opportunities for acknowledgement of harm
- Restorative practices when requested by survivors and appropriate to the circumstances

Learn from Cases

A major gap in both the Albany Presbytery policy and in the practice of PCUSA nationally is tracking the incidence of cases, monitoring outcomes and sharing lessons learned. Policies are most effective when organizations regularly evaluate how they function in practice. Track-



ing cases can reveal patterns, procedural and safeguarding gaps, training needs, communication challenges and opportunities for strengthened community safety.

Sharing information about substantiated findings about perpetrators of abuse is critical to preventing further misconduct taking place in other jurisdictions.

In cooperation with PCUSA at regional and national levels, the presbytery should establish processes for:

- Tracking cases, support provided and outcomes
- Sharing relevant information in which misconduct has been substantiated across presbyteries that can be taken into account for future employment and volunteer decisions
- Reviewing lessons learned
- Monitoring implementation of recommendations
- Periodic policy review
- Reporting aggregate trends to leadership

Accountability and Implementation of Recommendations

To ensure changes recommended in this report are meaningful and implemented effectively, we recommend creating an AC that would have responsibility for overseeing the presbytery's efforts to improve its approach to misconduct complaints.

The AC should:

- Track implementation of recommendations for at least two years following publication of the report, and until fully implemented
- Provide updates to the presbytery on implementation after one year and two years
- Periodically review and update policies, procedures and training thereafter
- Maintain and regularly update – at a minimum once a year -- referral resources and support networks

Regional Support

Some of the challenges faced by presbyteries grappling with a sexual abuse case may be ameliorated with more coordinated support at a regional level from the synod. People we interviewed who participated in investigative processes that were seen as successful by survivors and stakeholders all emphasized that the key to their success was the composition of the panel which was described as the “anchor” of a strong process. Successful teams frequently included members who had direct experience working with trauma survivors.

Qualified candidates for ICs or response teams may be hard to find in an individual presbytery, especially those that are small or rural. Policies frequently seek members of a response team



with particular expertise, such as a lawyer, an insurance expert, human resources, a public relations person, a counselor or mental health expert, and/or an expert in child abuse or trauma. Interviewees noted that “qualified people may not be easy to find everywhere” and many presbyteries won’t have “the financial or human resources or expertise” required to handle these cases sensitively. When asked about a response team, one clerk said, “The team was supposed to be comprised of an attorney, psychologist, insurance expert, and others but it was impossible to recruit those people. No one wanted to serve on that team.”

Creating a response team of volunteers with that expertise and an uncertain scope of work may be more easily accomplished at a regional level. One pastor expressed concern that, “In small rural congregations, people don’t have training and might minimize or dismiss these cases.” A PCUSA employee said being “trauma-informed is really important, and very hard to find.”

Selecting IC members from outside the presbytery for sensitive cases, which is not prohibited by the Book of Order, could also help with confidentiality and establishing an independent and neutral IC. Clerks noted that finding IC members who do not know the accused may be a challenge since PCUSA’s culture is so relational. Indeed, one interviewee said not knowing each other cannot be disqualifying because “if that were a conflict they would need the Methodists to come in!” Interviewees we spoke with who participated in ICs or ACs often said they had some familiarity with the accused. One clerk said it is “hard to find people who don’t know the accused... everyone knows or is related to everyone.” Another went further and said investigations “should be outsourced to an expert. Everyone knows everyone ... even in other presbyteries there are three degrees of separation.” A clerk from an urban area expressed concern about the appearance of impartiality in small presbyteries where everyone knows each other. Moreover, as one former IC member noted “It can be messy or awkward to criticize someone you know or question them.”

Survivor advocates and experts also recommend using an external, independent third-party for investigation of cases. One noted that people within the church have “implicit bias” and “loyalties,” concluding bluntly that an institution cannot credibly investigate itself. Another similarly pointed out the difficulties inherent in having investigators that are “ beholden to the institution,” but also highlighted that there are potential conflicts with having third-party investigators who may not be truly independent of the institution that hired them.

The decentralized structure of PCUSA also presents challenges for clerks who would benefit from understanding how other presbyteries have handled cases. Almost all the clerks we spoke with bemoaned the lack of a way to learn from other presbyteries about how they have handled similar cases. Lack of guidance from PCUSA meant clerks have to “figure it out on their own.” The stress of managing these cases and balancing the demands of complying with



the Book of Order with providing pastoral care for stakeholders can be stressful and draining to clerks as discussed earlier. One clerk, who frequently gets calls from other clerks asking for advice, told us that “Gatherings where people who have been through this could discuss cases together would be helpful amongst peers.” This could also be something that the Association of Clerks could facilitate nationally and should include those with experience and expertise, even if they are not stated clerks.

In addition, there should be clearer methods of disclosing misconduct, including a means to report anonymously, and resources posted on synods’ websites. A retired stated clerk told us “People will report to their pastor but what do they do if the pastor is the problem? We need more reporting options.” Of the 12 working synod websites Vestry Laight reviewed, no reporting mechanism could be located. Nor were there links to regional resources for trauma-informed trainings or other forms of support such as counseling in local communities. Only one, the Synod of Lakes and Prairies, had resources relating to sexual misconduct on its website at all – links to videos on boundary training and child sexual abuse prevention. We could also only locate, with effort, one policy on child sexual abuse on a synod website. This is a missed opportunity to reinforce that PCUSA cares about the safety and wellbeing of its members and takes this issue seriously.



“People will report to their pastor but what do they do if the pastor is the problem? We need more reporting options.”

— Retired Stated Clerk

Finally, many interviewed experts thought an ombuds would be a helpful (even “stupendous”) regional or national resource. This would provide members with a trained person to raise questions or concerns about behavior or disciplinary options without triggering automatic formal disciplinary processes. The ombuds could answer questions about policies and explain processes to allow congregants to have a better understanding of their options, enabling them to make more informed decisions about how to handle a delicate matter. One clerk described a situation he was aware of where someone started to disclose unwelcome advances to a minister who stopped them from saying more because any hint of misconduct must go through the official disciplinary process. An ombuds would have been a safe place for the person to raise concerns and ask questions without automatically triggering a process they may not wish to participate in.



One expert suggested the ombuds be from outside the presbytery because if it is a member of the presbytery or a staff member “it gets sticky.” In addition, or in the alternative, the synod could provide a victim advocate who could be another channel for making a disclosure and could support the victim through restorative justice or disciplinary processes and provide resources for mental health care and to support any immediate needs. Providing support for victims and complainants in the process (or accompaniment) is the subject of a recommendation by the ACWGJ to the 2026 General Assembly and discussed further below.

Recommendations

Survivor Support and Consultation

- Establish at the national or synod level:
 - An independent ombudsperson or survivor advocate
 - A confidential resource for individuals seeking information before deciding whether to make a formal report
 - Support resources that can accompany individuals through church disciplinary processes

Shared Expertise and Resources – Regional

- Develop
 - Regional response teams or pools of trained Investigating Committee members
 - Shared trauma-informed and survivor-centered training resources
 - Easily accessible synod-level information regarding disclosure options, policies and survivor support resources
 - Opportunities for clerks, response team members and Investigating Committee members to share lessons learned while respecting confidentiality

PCUSA

The Presbyterian Church is characterized by a decentralized structure with shared and localized decision-making power. The principle of allowing presbyteries to oversee local policies and enforce disciplinary measures does not mean that there cannot be baseline standards to ensure that churches are safe spaces and that disclosures are received in a consistent trauma-informed and survivor-centered manner. Without more standardized guidance from PCUSA, survivors may have very different experiences and levels of support depending on which presbytery they report to.

Over the course of our conversations, almost everyone expressed a desire for more support and resources from the national office on handling these issues. Training on disciplinary pro-



ceedings was “beautifully presented” and appreciated but limited to the process and did not include information about personal interactions or how to navigate trauma. Many expressed a desire for more expertise and resources coming from headquarters, even while recognizing that PCUSA is facing financial headwinds. Not everyone agreed on the form the support and resources should take, but there was widespread recognition that capacity and resources vary across presbyteries and that there is little information or consistency about how cases are handled. Clerks told us they “figured it out on our own.”

The following section describes areas in which interviewees saw opportunities for more PCUSA involvement. Gathering a broader sampling of feedback from across the denomination would be helpful in determining the best way forward, a proposal that has been suggested by the ACWGJ (GEN-05) for discussion at the 2026 General Assembly. The information gathered in our specific sampling of stakeholders supports the ACWGJ’s recommendation to establish this committee.

The Association of Stated Clerks is also in the process of revising its 2011 Guide for Judicial Process, and they should consider the recommendations and feedback contained in this report to address gaps in the prior Guide on how to manage sensitive investigations.

Data Collection to Ensure Transparency and Accountability and Offender Registry

As discussed above, tracking cases can reveal patterns, procedural and safeguarding gaps, training needs, communication challenges and opportunities for strengthened community safety. In 2018, the 223rd General Assembly directed stated clerks to commit to transparency about the number of sexual misconduct cases that are charged at all levels of the presbytery and encouraged mid-councils “to voluntarily submit the number of sexual misconduct allegations and charges to the Stated Clerk to be reported to the General Assembly.”

As the Advocacy Committee for Women’s Concerns noted in comments to the 224th General Assembly, “Making the statistics available is critical to creating a culture of transparency and disrupting damaging cycles of secrecy.” However, it seems the only information collected is the number of allegations and charges, not the outcomes or information about the case. And even that information is incomplete.

According to the Report of Allegations and Charges of Sexual Misconduct (OVT-092) submitted to the 227th General Assembly (2026), in 2025, only 71 percent of presbyteries (116/164) submitted information about sexual misconduct allegations. An advocate who reviewed the data described it as “skimpy,” “woefully inadequate” and “useless” with only two or three columns of scant information. They said when they saw it, they wondered “Where is the rest of the data-



base?” because they were certain that could not be all there was.

While PCUSA may be aware of some abuse allegations because they came through their hotline or they provided training on disciplinary processes to IC members, it does not know of the outcomes of those cases unless they learn about it by chance. Nor is it clear whether or not the hotline tracks information about the calls it receives. An advocate was aghast that that information may not be available, stating that “When I heard that people could be courageous enough to come forward and that there is not systemic information about that, all I could think of was Epstein.”

Without systematically tracking numbers and types of cases, it will be difficult to know the extent of problems or if there are particular hot spots that require attention. Moreover, tracking information will help determine whether trainings are being impactful over time and where resources and training should be concentrated. Because the clerks do submit information to PCUSA on other matters, providing additional information should not be overly burdensome, particularly as there do not appear to be many cases.



“Making the statistics available is critical to creating a culture of transparency and disrupting damaging cycles of secrecy.”

—Advice and Counsel Advocacy Committee for Women’s Concerns, comments to the 224th General Assembly (2020) on HSB-05

The ACWGJ has submitted a proposal for the 2026 General Assembly (GEN-04) that would require preparation of a questionnaire on handling of sexual misconduct cases (respecting the bounds of confidentiality). Responses to the questionnaire would help understand “patterns and practices and outcomes across the Church” and reduce the risk of further harm to survivors. It would also help the Church recognize where its strengths are, areas needing improvement and provide a basis for forward-looking recommendations.

Gathering information about complaints might serve another purpose as well: a centralized database of those who have been accused of misconduct, including those who have renounced the church to avoid disciplinary processes, might be a helpful resource to enable churches to ensure they are not inadvertently accepting volunteers or chaperones for youth programs who have been embroiled in misconduct before. As one former AC member asked, “How do you protect against the old boy network or white men protecting each other?”

At a local level, interviewees expressed concern that someone who had credible allegations



of abuse against them, but renounced the church could potentially be in a position to commit further harm because local churches may not check – or have a way of effectively checking – backgrounds of people who come in. Some of the case studies we reviewed indeed involved people who switched churches and continued misconduct after having a complaint filed against them elsewhere. One retired clerk who grappled with this issue said “PCUSA should have a database and sexual misconduct registry including anyone sanctioned. If I were still a clerk, I would propose it.” Another pastor said, “Historically it has been easy for a pastor to go to another presbytery or denomination...there is need for reform there.” The practice is used by other religious institutions: for example, the Central Conference of American Rabbis posts a [public list](#) of rabbis who have been expelled, censured or suspended for misconduct and the reason. The Archdiocese of Chicago also publishes a list of clergy who have had allegations of sexual abuse of a minor substantiated against them by the Archdiocese.

In the absence of an organized response by religious institutions, some non-profit and advocacy groups have collected this information and become a trusted resource for members of their communities. For example, Mennonite Abuse Prevention publishes extensive information about sexual abuse cases on its website, including documentation of abuse and positions held by the person convicted.

Resources for Trauma-Informed Training

Neither the Book of Order nor the Guide for Judicial Process sets forth any guidelines on how to handle sensitive sexual or child abuse cases. At the time Albany Presbytery received its case in 2024, PCUSA had yet to put trauma-informed resources on its website. Helpful [guidelines and resources](#) have since been posted on PCUSA’s website providing information about how to respond to allegations of sexual abuse in a trauma-informed manner.

However, PCUSA does not provide training on a trauma-informed response to a sexual abuse case, nor does it have recommendations for organizations that do provide this service or have requirements on the content of sexual misconduct curricula even for training that is mandated. An interviewee from PCUSA said that presbyteries have their own preferred providers though acknowledge that “the challenge is that access to training resources does not translate across presbyteries.”

Those who participated in ICs or ACs felt they had to create their own system on the spot. To their credit, some were very successful and relied on the techniques used by the PCUSA’s Independent Committee of Inquiry during their investigation of abuse in missionary schools. Another presbytery used a helpful [guide](#) from FaithTrust Institute and hired an expert, Into Account, to help with their work.

However, IC members in Albany who were confronted with judicial proceedings as prescribed



by the Book of Order were untrained and said they “walked into something they were unprepared to handle” and were “woefully unprepared.” One “felt way in over my head” despite having years of experience working with trauma victims. The lack of preparation caused IC members a great deal of stress “because we fear inflicting harm on someone.” An attempt to train them after the process started with an expert on trauma proved to be too little too late. Even worse, the lack of preparedness resulted in missteps that created unnecessary and significant trauma for the survivor.

In another presbytery, the clerk had personal connections to a group that was able to train the IC members prior to the start of the investigation into sexual abuse cases. A member of a PJC in another area bemoaned the lack of training of her fellow PJC members because they struggled to understand the survivor’s challenges with her memory, or to present all the available evidence, and as a result felt they could not hold the perpetrator accountable.

The varying experiences, and efforts to reinvent the wheel by each group trying to respond sensitively to complaints, demonstrate the need for a consistent set of standards or training required for participants in sexual misconduct investigations or adjudications. A denominational-level curriculum that could be used to prepare investigating committees would be an important way to help mitigate the risk of institutional betrayal that can happen when an organization responds poorly to a crisis.

Additional Guidance for Clerks in Selection of IC Members and in Handling Cases

There is no set guidance or criteria provided to clerks by PCUSA or in the Guide for Judicial Process for criteria to use to select members of an investigating committee or administrative commission. In speaking with clerks, it was clear that they selected people whom they knew personally and thought would have the right temperament and patience to do the investigation. Many clerks described the selection as, “Who do I know who could serve in this capacity and do I know them well enough to know they would do a good job?”

Although clerks felt they selected well in the cases they discussed with us, real or perceived conflicts of interest may arise. As one clerk said, “Often it’s ‘who can we find to do this?’” or simply whoever volunteers. No guideline exists requiring certain types of experience, such as mental health providers, social workers, psychiatric nurses, rape counseling center clinicians, children’s services providers, or law enforcement. Virtually no restriction exists regarding association with the parties at least at the IC level. The list of possible candidates is often short, and it’s not widely understood whether they can engage outside experts when cases are particularly difficult or require expertise in child abuse.



None of the clerks we spoke with had a standing roster of people who were qualified and trained and willing to volunteer for this service, though we heard that some presbyteries do have this practice. It is not difficult to imagine a scenario in which a clerk, sympathetic to the accused or to the victim, could pick like-minded IC members. Having guardrails for selection – and the option to select from a broader pool, preferably of skilled people who have been pre-selected and trained in advance – would be helpful to ensuring a process that is fair and seen as fair and would ease the burden on clerks who have only a short time to recruit IC members.

One former IC member suggested using “blue sky time,” when not in crisis, “to create that roster of trauma-informed therapists and counselors, sexual misconduct, sexual abuse folks.” Advance training and preparation may have additional positives as well. As a PCUSA staff member said, “Even if there are no cases, it is good to have that knowledge base spread throughout the presbytery. . . as it is beneficial to have people understand trauma.”

Expertise and Support from PCUSA

Most people we interviewed expressed a desire for more support from the national office on how to manage these cases. Currently, there is no ombuds at headquarters to address questions or concerns from church members. And while the office provides training and welcome support on the technicalities of disciplinary and administrative processes, it does not provide sufficient scaffolding for managing complex sexual abuse cases. This contributes to wide variation in how processes are approached, and, in some cases, can cause harm to participants.

Suggestions for specialized support were varied and included:

- Reinstatement of an ombuds;
- A national roster of trained trauma-informed experts (volunteers) who could either serve as IC members in sexual abuse cases or walk alongside ICs to ensure they use trauma-informed practices as part of their investigations;
- A support team (with volunteers supported by PCUSA staff who have experience in trauma) similar to that in place for disasters. Presbyterian Disaster Assistance provides expertise and support for local leaders, referrals to local resources and help with pastoral care for impacted congregations;
- Sharing lessons learned across different cases.

As one advocate said “If we have that [disaster assistance] model, why can’t we use it for this? Why is sexual misconduct treated like a lesser evil?” Another pastor said, “We need to hire people who are trained to do this work – and can cultivate a volunteer team across the denomination.”

In addition, PCUSA and the Presbyterian Life Committee could be a repository for resources



for presbyteries managing these cases and have available suggested training curricula, reading materials, resources for mental health services for participants in disciplinary processes (including IC members and members of the PJC), and lists of organizations that can provide support for survivors.

Interviewees expressed different views on what would be most helpful from PCUSA. One said, “A national team [to investigate] would be an enormously valuable resource to mitigate against doing further harm to the victim and would be fantastic.” Another clerk was “not a huge fan of a national team,” because every case is different and he felt a local response may be more appropriate especially if local law enforcement is involved. However, all agreed with his sentiment that it “would be nice to have national staff trained to respond institutionally when these issues come up.”

Because it is a complicated issue, further study would be beneficial to determine what help at the national and/or regional level would be most effective. The ACWGJ proposal to create a special committee to partner with a synod to create a pilot program to provide trauma-informed, survivor-centered support and accompaniment and assess its implementation may also help determine which forms of support would be most helpful from PCUSA. The proposed committee would help identify gaps and review how disclosures are received, assess training and internal communications and make recommendations regarding structural changes that would improve accountability and transparency and ensure a more consistent survivor-centered response across the denomination.

Clearer and More Visible Information about Disclosure Options and Resources

In order to effectively address sexual abuse and ensure a safe and welcoming environment for all members of the denomination, it is essential that concerns about misconduct be brought forward. To ensure that there is a safe place to raise concerns about abuse or misconduct, and no conflict of interest (in case the reporting channel is implicated in the misconduct or close to one of the parties), it is important that there are multiple options available to disclose misconduct, including the option to report anonymously. The disclosure options must be communicated effectively at all levels of the denomination to work.

While PCUSA has a hotline for reporting operated by Praesidium, information about the hotline is not easy to find and it seems it is not used frequently. The relatively small number of cases, as indicated in the report to the 2026 General Assembly, may indicate that reporting mechanisms are not well known, or that there are concerns about coming forward. Even people who work on these issues were not always aware a hotline existed. One advocate and expert said, “I had no idea there was a hotline.” As one survivor noted “[the reporting hotline used] to be on



the front page of the website, now it’s buried under multiple links under legal.”

The page with information about reporting does not include descriptions of the types of behavior that should be reported, how the reports would be handled, or supportive language that would encourage disclosure or reassure victims that they will be treated in a trauma-informed manner. The link to “Safe Ministries Resources” was not working on June 1, 2026, nor were the links to resources provided by FaithTrust Institute.

The helpful guidance on how to respond to allegations of sexual misconduct and abuse using trauma-informed approaches, including a helpful healing resource guide, are not easy to find on the current website, and the other materials do not reference the need for or commitment to a trauma-informed response to survivors.

The commitment to a trauma-informed response and to creating safe spaces for members should be integrated throughout the “Creating Safe Ministries” section, which itself should be more prominently featured on the website. Policies should be set forth in an easily understandable manner and should be readily accessible in multiple places. Other denominations, such as the Reform Central Synagogue in New York City, has its anti-harassment and culture of respect policy with a link to [reporting options](#) clearly set forth on the home page of its website which sends a message that they prioritize the safety and well-being of their members. As a survivor told us, “Seeing something on the website that says, ‘This is how our church protects the congregation and how we view abuse’ would make me want to join that kind of church.”

In addition, PCUSA does not make easily accessible AC reports or other public reports or investigations into sexual misconduct. Reports from the Independent Commission of Inquiry, the Mid-Kentucky Presbytery and the Atlanta Presbytery (linked in the appendix) provide valuable examples of how to conduct trauma-informed investigations and how to promote safety in church communities outside the judicial process. Yet we were not able to locate those resources on the PCUSA website and many may not know they exist.

Book of Order Reforms

An analysis of the Book of Order is beyond the scope of this report. However, a number of interviewees felt there are opportunities to revise the Book of Order to make disciplinary processes more effective and more sensitive to the needs of survivors. Many we spoke to felt the Book of Order was “accused-centered” or “centered around the perpetrator” and should be improved to be more supportive of survivors and complainants. We are sharing some of the suggestions raised here with the hope of inspiring further reflection for future General Assemblies:

- The burden of proof (“Evidence compels an abiding conviction that the material



facts necessary to prove the charge are true”) is more akin to the “beyond a reasonable doubt” standard which applies in criminal settings when someone’s liberty is at stake, than civil or institutional settings which generally require a finding that the events more likely than not occurred (a preponderance of evidence). Given the challenges in proving these cases, and the importance of the safety and well-being of members, the preponderance of evidence standard is more appropriate. A high burden of proof may discourage people from coming forward and may be frustrating in cases where adjudicators believe misconduct occurred though evidence was hard to come by.

- Encourage use of outside experts to assist in conducting investigations in complicated cases, particularly historical cases involving minors.
- Several people felt the disciplinary process is too formal and legalistic and would welcome a way to address sexual abuse complaints that did not necessarily trigger an entire disciplinary proceeding. While there is an Alternative Resolution Process provided for in the Book of Order, it is only an option after the investigation has been completed. We recommend making that process, or an alternative mediation process, more accessible to those who wish to raise concerns but not participate in a quasi-judicial process. Having options, and flexibility, is an important component of a survivor-centered response. One participant in an AC noted “It was successful because it wasn’t a judicial process and it was survivor-led.”

Recommendations

Systemwide Learning and Accountability – PCUSA

- PCUSA should establish processes for collecting enough annual information about sexual misconduct allegations and cases to identify patterns, measure accountability and improve prevention—while avoiding disclosure of personally identifiable information. This includes:
 - o Number of complaints, whether historical or new, and whether involving clergy, employees, members, etc.
 - o Nature of the allegation
 - o Trainings received
 - o Status of the report
 - o Investigation outcomes, administrative actions, and disciplinary actions
 - o Survivor participation and support received
 - o Timeline of resolution
 - o Lessons learned
- Share relevant information across presbyteries regarding substantiated misconduct that can be taken into account for future employment and volunteer decisions



- Report aggregate trends to leadership, review lessons learned and share findings across presbyteries
- Monitor implementation of recommendations
- Conduct periodic reviews and updates of policies, training, and implementation of policy recommendations
- The Association of Stated Clerks should consider the recommendations and feedback contained in this report when they revise the 2011 Guide for Judicial Process
- Report aggregate trends to leadership and more broadly within the community
- Reform the Book of Order to be more aligned with prioritizing the safety and well-being of members, by, *inter alia*:
 - o revising the burden of proof to the preponderance of evidence standard that is more common in institutional settings; and
 - o amending mediation and restorative justice processes to include options that do not require IC involvement

227th General Assembly Actions

- o Support ACWGJ Resolution GEN-05 (Survivor Support)
- o Support ACWGJ Resolution GEN-04 (Sexual Misconduct, Transparency and Accountability)



GLOSSARY

Advocacy Committee for Women and Gender Justice (“ACWGJ”): An official standing committee of the General Assembly of PCUSA that serves as a policy advisor dedicated to dismantling sexism and promoting gender equity in the denomination.

Administrative Commission (“AC”): A governing body empowered by a higher council to take direct actions, make legal rulings and enforce structural changes within a local church. An AC can also be created to investigate a sexual abuse case where the church was unable to conduct disciplinary processes to hear the allegations, document what happened and issue mandates to prevent the abuse from happening again.

Book of Order: The Book of Order is the governing constitution used by the Presbyterian Church. It sets forth church organizational structure and defines how the church operates, including disciplinary processes.

Investigating Committee (“IC”): A Specially appointed body consisting of at least three people tasked with conducting a preliminary inquiry when an allegation of a disciplinary offense is made against a church member or ordained minister. Its role is to impartially gather facts and determine if there is probable cause to file formal charges.

Ombuds: An independent, neutral, and confidential official who can help navigate and demystify complex church policies, politics and judicial rules without taking sides and help church members understand how the process works.

Permanent Judicial Commission (“PJC”): An elected standing court of the church responsible for hearing, trying and deciding cases of church law and discipline when an IC files charges.

Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (“PCUSA”): The largest Presbyterian denomination in the country, characterized by a representative system of church governance and a commitment to progressive theological, social, and political positions (as contrasted to the Presbyterian Church in America).

Stated Clerk: Chief ecclesial and polity officer elected by a regional or national church council to record transactions, maintain official rolls, and serve as the primary advisor and interpreter of the church constitution. The stated clerk is responsible for creating and supporting ICs.

Survivor-Centered: A “survivor-centered” approach places the dignity, safety, wishes, rights, and well-being of survivors at the center of prevention, response, and accountability efforts. Core principles of this approach include

- Respect for survivor autonomy and agency
- Safety and protection from further harm
- Confidentiality and privacy



- Informed consent
- Non-discrimination
- Support for healing and recovery, including access to services
- Respect for survivors' rights to seek remedies through formal and informal processes

Synod: The Synod is the regional governing body for the Presbyterian church. It acts as a form of administration between the presbyteries and the General Assembly and is responsible for providing support to the presbyteries in the region. Each synod consists of at least three presbyteries. There are currently 16 synods in the United States.

Trauma-informed: A “trauma-informed approach”

- Understands trauma, its prevalence, and when it has likely occurred
- Recognizes the signs and impacts of trauma
- Integrates knowledge of trauma into policies, procedures, and practices
- Seeks to avoid re-traumatization and prioritizes physical, emotional, and spiritual safety
- Promotes trustworthiness, transparency, and clear communication
- Supports survivor choice, agency, and control wherever possible.

LIST OF RESOURCES

Survivor-Centered, Trauma-Informed Organizations

[AWAKE](#)

[BEAU BIDEN FOUNDATION FOR THE PROTECTION OF CHILDREN](#)

[EVAWI](#)

[INTO ACCOUNT](#)

[RESTORED VOICES COLLECTIVE](#)

PCUSA Resources and Reports

[Advocacy Committee for Women and Gender Justice](#)

- [Resolution on Sexual Misconduct, Transparency, and Accountability](#) (227th General Assembly, 2026)
- [Resolution on Survivor Support](#) (227th General Assembly, 2026)

[Creating Safe Ministries](#) Resource Page: the PCUSA website has a section devoted to Creating Safe Ministries, but it is difficult to find. Accordingly, we include it here as well as links to some of the recently created trauma-informed resources created by the Survivors of Sexual Misconduct Taskforce:

- [Being Trauma-Informed in the Church](#)
- [Healing Communities Resource Guide](#)
- [Trauma-Informed Guide for Sessions and Presbyteries: Responding to Allegations of Sexual Misconduct and Abuse](#)

[Report of Administrative Commission Investigating Mr. Jud Hendrix, Former Pastor at Covenant Community Church, Louisville, KY Presented to Mid-Kentucky Presbytery on May 20, 2024](#)

Report, recommendations and comments related to the [Survivors of Sexual Misconduct Taskforce, 225th General Assembly](#) (2022)

The Summary Report of the [Presbytery of Greater Atlanta](#) Administrative Commission (2013) (not publicly available online; contact the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta for access)



[Final Report of the Independent Abuse Review Panel, Presbyterian Church \(U.S. A.\) \(October 2010\)](#)

[Final Report of the Independent Committee of Inquiry Presbyterian Church \(U.S.A.\), \(September 2002\)](#)

Additional Resources

[The DASA Committee Website](#)

- This independent website shares information presented by the DASA Committee on domestic abuse and sexual assault in the church with the 49th General Assembly (2022) of the Presbyterian Church of America. It also collects and provides educational resources for survivors and churches seeking guidance in responding to abuse.

Marie Fortune, FaithTrust Institute's [Responding to Spiritual Leader Misconduct, A Handbook](#) (2022)

[Dr. Hilary Jerome Scarsella](#)

- [Principles on Survivor-Centered Care](#)
- [12 Principles of Survivor-Centered Policy & Praxis](#)

