



Albany  
Presbytery

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## Summary Report & Recommendations

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VESTRY LAIGHT

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This report was commissioned after Albany Presbytery's response to a report of child sexual abuse revealed significant challenges in navigating the church disciplinary process and responding to sexual misconduct allegations in a manner that is survivor-centered, trauma-informed, and consistent with the church's values. There have been few reported cases in the Presbytery, making it hard to ascertain the full extent of the problem, but Albany Presbytery's experience highlighted a broader reality: many presbyteries are not adequately prepared for the complex practical, pastoral, and institutional challenges that arise when such allegations are reported. Although the review was prompted by Albany Presbytery's experience, many of the lessons learned have relevance for other presbyteries and for the denomination as a whole.

In preparation for this report, Vestry Laight conducted more than 30 interviews with clergy, church leaders, survivors, survivor advocates, subject matter experts, and others with experience in church investigative and disciplinary processes. We also reviewed church policies, investigative reports, training materials, and relevant literature concerning sexual misconduct prevention, survivor support, and institutional response.

Research and interviews conducted for the project demonstrate that effective responses to sexual misconduct cannot be improvised after a disclosure is received. Preparation must occur beforehand. It requires a culture that promotes healthy boundaries, encourages reporting, supports those who have been harmed, equips leaders to respond appropriately, and ensures that church processes do not inadvertently cause additional harm. Policies—and their robust implementation--must reflect and reinforce this.

The recommendations that follow are intended to strengthen Albany Presbytery's preparedness before, during, and after disclosures of misconduct arise. They focus on building a survivor-centered and trauma-informed ministry culture, expanding reporting and support resources, improving training and preparedness for those responsible for responding to disclosures, strengthening policies and accountability mechanisms, and developing additional regional and national resources within Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)(PCUSA). Transparency, monitoring, and learning are critical for ensuring that policies turn into practice, and that lessons are learned and shared to continue strengthening prevention and response to sexual misconduct.

Collectively, these recommendations are designed to help create a church environment where prevention of sexual misconduct is prioritized, concerns can be raised safely and confidentially, reports are handled with compassion and fairness, and responses reflect both the church's values and its responsibility to protect those entrusted to its care.

### [Survivor-Centered and Trauma-Informed Defined\\*](#)

## Principal Conclusions

- Effective responses to sexual misconduct cannot be improvised after a disclosure is received; preparation must occur beforehand.
- Creating a safe ministry culture requires an explicit commitment to prevention, healthy boundaries, accountability, and support for those who have been harmed.
- A survivor-centered, trauma-informed approach is consistent with both best practices and the church's pastoral mission.
- Effective response depends on culture, training, leadership preparedness and support systems—not solely on disciplinary procedures and compliance policies.
- Albany Presbytery would benefit from stronger reporting pathways, support resources, and preparedness for Response Teams and Investigating Committees (ICs).
- Some of the most important improvements identified in this report will require collaboration at the synod and PCUSA levels.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations are organized by the entity with the primary ability to implement them and by topic.

### Albany Presbytery: Culture, Policy and Practice 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

- o 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
  - o 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.)
- 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”

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

## *Responding to Disclosures*

- 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

- o 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
- o 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
- o Respect fully a survivor's choice in whether they wish to participate in a formal complaint, investigation or disciplinary process.
- o 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
- o 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
  - o 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.
  - o 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-Investigation Process
  - o 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
  - o 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.
  - o Follow up with the parties to ensure they do not experience retaliation in the aftermath of the process
  - o Debrief with participants to discuss the process and determine what went well and where there are areas for improvement for future handling of complaints.

## Policy Revisions

- Revise Policy to be More Survivor-Centered
  - Incorporate cultural and training recommendations above into formal policy, including and in addition:
    - 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
    - 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
- Clarify Expectations and Procedures
  - Clarify legal mandatory reporting requirements
  - Go beyond New York State requirements and voluntarily adopt mandatory reporting expectations, requiring clergy and employees to report to civil legal authorities sexual abuse involving minors and other victims who may be especially vulnerable
  - 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
  - Provide 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
  - Offer accompaniment of a congregation healing from harm
  - Address opportunities for acknowledgement of harm
  - Consider restorative practices when requested by survivors and appropriate to the circumstances

## ***Accountability and Continuous Improvement***

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

Create an AC that would have responsibility for overseeing the presbytery's efforts to improve its approach to misconduct complaints, including:

- Tracking implementation of recommendations for at least two years following publication of this report, and until fully implemented
- Providing updates to the presbytery on implementation after one year and two years
- Periodically reviewing and updating policies, procedures and training thereafter

## **Regional and National Recommendations (Synod and PCUSA)**

### ***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

### **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

### **227<sup>th</sup> General Assembly Actions**

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

## Survivor-Centered and Trauma-Informed Defined\*

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.

\* The definitions of *survivor-centered* and *trauma-informed* used in this report are based on widely accepted frameworks developed by the United Nations Inter-Agency Standing Committee, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, and the U.S. Department of Justice Office for Victims of Crime.