

WHITE PAPER

**AN ANALYSIS IN THREE PARTS
SUBMITTED TO
ALBANY PRESBYTERY, PC(U.S.A.)**

Part 1

UNRIGHTEOUS

**A post-mortem analysis of the systemic failure
of a Presbyterian disciplinary proceeding
regarding sexualized misconduct, abuse, and violence.**

Part 2

DISORDERED

Toward Recommendations.

Appendix

PROFANING THE SACRED

Meditations on Our Scriptural Illiteracy.

James S. Evinger

2025

Preface

Per a signed letter of agreement, June 29, 2025, Albany Presbytery retained Vestry Laight LLC “to conduct an independent investigation into [Albany’s] handling of a complaint” related to a specific individual whom Albany had involved in a still active, formal disciplinary proceeding. The focus of the report to be issued by Vestry Laight “is institutional response to sexual misconduct complaints and not the underlying abuse.” Albany’s goal is “responding in a survivor-centered trauma informed way to [sexual] abuse victims.”

My role in the proceeding was that of a resource person for the individual whose adverse experiences were the catalyst for the investigation. I consented to several interviews by Vestry Laight’s principal. Because those were not recorded and not transcribed, I prepared and submitted two written documents. The first, “Unrighteous: A post-mortem analysis of the systemic failure of a Presbyterian disciplinary proceeding regarding sexualized misconduct, abuse, and violence,” was sent to the principal in August, 2025, before the disciplinary proceeding was concluded in September. The second, “Disordered: Toward Recommendations,” was sent in October, before an investigative report was issued. (As of this date, January 9, 2026, if the report has been completed, it has not been released.) I next requested and received permission from Vestry Laight’s principal to submit both documents to four key individuals by role in the Presbytery. They were sent on November 13.

Reflecting further on Albany’s goal as identified in the agreement letter, and given the later change in the scope of the investigation as no longer case-based, I prepared a third document, an appendix, “Profaning the Sacred: Meditations on Our Scriptural Illiteracy.” The discourse regarding Albany’s response had long been framed in secular, administrative language, a necessity given the proceeding’s *Book of Order* foundation. The appendix is a corrective to a unidimensional frame by inviting a spiritual or theological consideration for how we collectively approach the issues. This third document was sent to Albany’s key leaders on December 16.

The nature of the original disciplinary case in Albany was complex and complicated, and would challenge any presbytery’s responses. Those intensifiers, however, should not obscure the need to identify and address the essential issues in the Albany proceeding which prevented its achieving the goal of responding in survivor-centered and trauma-informed ways. The issues transcend that one presbytery, a reality reflected in the fact that awareness of, and concern about, the Albany proceeding has extended to people in other presbyteries and in national Church roles. With consent of the person for whom I have served as a resource, the three documents are available for dissemination beyond Albany.

The format used is that of a White Paper. White Papers serve multiple purposes. They exist to identify the roots of a difficult problem, provide background on a complex issue, outline data-backed policy options, propose evidence-based solutions, evaluate the risks and benefits of difficult choices, or educate stakeholders and decisionmakers. Those functions guide the spirit in which each part was created.

Two questions remain for me. Are we able collectively to recognize the Albany case as a God-given, *kairos* opportunity? What will it take for us to walk, finally, down another street?

(<https://www.doorway-to-self-esteem.com/autobiography-in-five-short-chapters.html>)

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January 9, 2026

Unrighteous: A post-mortem analysis of the systemic failure of a Presbyterian disciplinary proceeding regarding sexualized misconduct, abuse, and violence.

Personal introduction

The findings presented are based on my direct participation in 2023-2025 as a resource person on behalf of an individual (hereafter Person B) who was drawn into a formal disciplinary proceeding conducted by the Albany Presbytery. Based in the Albany, New York, region, Albany Presbytery is a standard administrative and programmatic unit of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), a national denomination.¹ Legally, the presbytery is a non-profit religious corporation under state law. The legalistic-style proceeding, yet to be concluded as of this date, was initiated against an individual (hereafter Person A) whose membership as a minister subjects him to Albany's original jurisdiction. The Church's constitution defines exercise of discipline as "the process by which active members of congregations and ministers of the Word and Sacrament are held accountable to the church and to each other..."²

Despite never consenting to participate according to the proceeding's terms, the mismanaged and often slipshod process entangled Person B in a flawed institutional model which predictably failed in multiple ways. I write to attest that chronic, systemic factors inflicted recurring traumatization on Person B. I offer an analysis of this systemic failure. In addition to my direct involvement, a substantial, prior foundation informs this case-specific analysis. I draw upon an aggregation of my published case reports and unpublished case notes from three decades of work, mostly as an unpaid volunteer, on behalf of children, adolescents, and adults who are survivors of ecclesiastical sexualized misconduct, abuse, and

¹ Albany is one of 173 presbyteries, a type of regional governing body, or council, of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). [Accessed 08/09/25: https://pma.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/map/map-north-america.html] Its organizational core consists of "about 60 congregations" in the upstate New York area. [Accessed 08/09/25: <https://albanypresbytery.org/about-us/>] There are three other types of Church governing bodies: Session, the board of a local congregation; Synod, which is composed of presbyteries in a geographic area; General Assembly, which has jurisdiction for the national Church. Congregations, presbyteries, synods, and the General Assembly are separate legal corporations.

² The reference is from Part II of the Church's constitution: Interim Unified Agency. (2025). Church Discipline, Chapter Two, Judicial Process Defined, D-2.03 Disciplinary Process, D-2.0301, Accountability of Individuals. In *Book of Order (2025-2027)*. Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, p. 133. [Accessed 08/10/25: https://www.pcusa.org/sites/default/files/2025-07/2025_0625_Book_of_Order_Interactive_2025-2027.pdf]

violence (SMAV), primarily within this denomination, but others as well. ³ The aggregation includes ecclesiastical ⁴ disciplinary cases, state and federal criminal cases, initiatives for ecclesiastical reform, independent research, national ecclesiastical fact-finding inquiries across multiple continents, ecclesiastical case consultations, educational presentations in ecclesiastical and secular settings, civil court proceedings as an expert witness, and ecclesiastical publications. Albany's sad case is not without precedent. Malpractice in SMAV matters is an endemic occurrence in many late 20th and early 21st century churches in this country.

Ecclesiastical institutions as a system

Contemporary descriptions of the systemic nature of an ecclesiastical institution in our society are commonly constructed around a set of three factors:

- ***Core religious beliefs*** (including creeds, doctrines, and tenets)
 - Some beliefs are convictional statements which reflect institutional identity and purpose, and others are ends-oriented declarations of aspirational goals.
- ***Formal structure***
 - Typically represented visually as a table of organization, this means-oriented format helps identify where authority, responsibility, decision-making, and power are assigned.
- ***Polity*** ⁵

³ Among religious institutions, there is no working consensus, let alone standardized definition, as to what constitutes sexualized acts which violate institutional rules. There is less definition of acts which are betrayals of persons in role relationships of fiduciary trust, whether committed by an individual perpetrator, one who aids or abets commission, or the religious institution. For an essential and highly-regarded discussion of the topic, see: Fortune, Marie M. (2006). *Sexual Violence: The Sin Revisited*. Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press. Since the early 1990s, the umbrella term in the Presbyterian Church has been *sexual misconduct*.

⁴ In the scholarly literature on religion, the term *ecclesiastical* denotes an institution identifying as Christian. The term *religion* is generic and neither denotes nor connotes a specific faith tradition.

⁵ A compelling argument can be made that factors of *formal structure* and *polity* matter more than *core religious beliefs*. The *Book of Order* devotes two pages to creeds and confessions as expressions of faith (pp. 9-10) and five pages (pp. 11-15) to principles of church order and government. In 1982, the World Council of Churches, a volunteer association of approximately 300 Christian denominations, issued its *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* publication. It capped 50 years of study which sought international consensus on the title's three topics as requisites for achieving unity. The text identifies areas of agreement and points of differences. The fewer the number of pages, the greater was the consensus and the fewer the obstacles to mutual recognition and collaboration. The sacrament of baptism, a ritual, is discussed in pp. 1-7. The sacrament of eucharist, or communion, a ritual, is discussed in pp. 8-15. However, the topic of ministry, an institutional office or a role, takes pp. 16-30,

- The term refers to a codified system of ecclesiastical governance consisting of institutional by-laws, rules, policies, and procedures.
- Polity is the formal basis for permitting, guiding, promoting, and sanctioning members' desirable behaviors.
- Polity is the formal basis of exercising discipline “for the correction and restraint of wrongdoing.”⁶ In ecclesiastical matters of SMAV, polity is the basis for limiting and prohibiting undesirable behaviors, and for institutional interventions to remedy harms.

While relevant and instructive as descriptors, these three factors do not reveal the determinative role of *Institutional culture*.⁷ This silent, fourth factor significantly influences how...

- ...beliefs are actually embodied and practiced.
 - E.g., the annual budget and its line items may document the actual, rather than rhetorical, commitment to enacting the proclaimed convictions and values.
- ...structure is actually functioning;
 - E.g., the allocation of resources – people, budget, time, and priority – may not be sufficient to support making progress towards announced institutional goals.
 - E.g., the infrastructure may be woefully insufficient, leaving the institution unprepared to effectively act to prevent SMAV or intervene upon its discovery.
- ...and polity is actually implemented.
 - E.g., practices may be activated in ways which undermine or contradict what is prescribed.

Institutional culture includes unwritten conventions which operate normatively as a bundle of incentives and rewards, and disincentives and penalties. In practice, these are meted out to certain members who are accorded a disproportionate degree of deference while others are isolated or shunned without just cause.

twice the pages of the two sacraments combined. [World Council of Churches. (1982). *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry (Faith and Order Paper No. 111)*. Geneva, Switzerland: Author. Accessed 08/07/25: https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/Document/FO1982_111_en.pdf]

⁶ Church Discipline, Chapter One, Principles of Church Discipline, Preamble, D-1.02 Church Discipline Defined, D-1.0201, p. 131.

⁷ The prominent 20th century business management theorist and consultant, Peter Drucker, is reputed to be the source of the adage, “Culture eats strategy for breakfast.” This succinct wisdom about systemic resistance also applies to the lag in the Church between its declared support of social equality and justice for people of color and women, and the status of those groups within the denomination. It was not until after the advent of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s that the first African American, Rev. Edler G. Hawkins, was elected in 1964 as Moderator of the General Assembly, the most public Church office. It was not until 18 years after the first woman was ordained as a minister in the Church that the Rev. Dr. Katie Geneva Cannon was ordained in 1974 as its first African American woman.

The following section identifies how systemic factors contributed to deleterious *process outcomes* for Person B in the context of Albany’s disciplinary case regarding SMAV. ⁸

Presenting symptom 1. It was frequently difficult to identify which Albany individuals or leadership units were responsible for decisions about the proceeding. Multiple sources created inconsistencies and confusion, especially around sensitive issues, e.g., confidentiality. Announcements of reversals led to misinterpretation and raised doubts about accuracy, reliability, intention, and competency. These produced outcomes of frustration, intensification of vulnerability, skepticism, and mistrust.

Analysis A combination of systemic factors contributed to this symptom.

▪ ***Core religious beliefs***

- The Presbyterian Church originated from the 16th century Reformation, a movement which began as an internal critique of the medieval Roman Catholic Church and ended in profound political, economic, and social change throughout Europe. As part of what is known as the Reformed Church tradition, Presbyterians joined the refutation of the status of the Catholic priestly class (a ranked hierarchy from pope to cardinals to bishops to priests), and affirmed the theological position that the true source of ecclesiastical authority and power was scripture, thus negating subservience to a single figure, and, through the promotion of literacy, extending to believers a new empowerment. ⁹

▪ ***Formal structure***

- Power divested from the priestly class was redistributed in an alternative institutional design. The locus of governance was given to governing bodies (now referred to as councils). Council members (termed presbyters) are a combination of laity and ministers in an intentional parity. ¹⁰ Membership is

⁸ The term *process outcomes* is used here to refer to Person B’s experiences during the phases of the case prior to its resolution. The term acknowledges the prevailing frequency of re-traumatization of persons who have survived interpersonal traumas and interact with institutional systems, e.g., law enforcement or health care. It draws upon the legal literature related to the model of therapeutic justice. See: Feldthusen, Bruce, Hankivsky, Olena, & Greaves, Lorraine. (2000). Therapeutic consequences of civil actions for damages and compensation claims by victims of sexual abuse. *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law / Revue Femmes et Droit*, 12(1):66-116.

⁹ This belief is now embedded in the open section of Part II of the Church’s constitution, the *Book of Order*: “...all Church power” is subject to “the Holy Scriptures [which] are the only rule of faith and manners.” F-3.0107, Church Power, under Historic Principles of Church Order, F-3.01, pp. 12-13.

¹⁰ F-3.0202, Governed by Presbyters, p. 13. (Membership is voluntary, i.e., the position is not paid. However, ministers whose employment is church-connected are more likely to be indirectly compensated for their involvement in presbytery governance and therefore more able to commit their time, a circumstance which increases their influence.)

ordered by “regular gradation,” i.e., rotating, term-limited classes.¹¹ This diffusion of what was entrenched hierarchical authority is an explicit choice: “Ecclesiastical jurisdiction is a shared power to be exercised jointly by presbyters gathered in councils.”¹²

Commentary There are virtues to structural parity between laity and ministers, decentralized and shared power in decision-making, and rotating classes of governance members,. However, in the Albany case of SMAV, these combined to obscure who was responsible and for what. At times, overlapping assignments of Albany’s key leaders led to no one fulfilling the tasks. At times, the need to involve multiple sub-units delayed reaching closure on vital issues. I have been consulted by plaintiff’s attorneys who cite the difficulty of determining which Presbyterian leaders or entities are accountable in cases of third party negligence and failure to supervise. Presbyterian diffusion of authority contrasts with the clarity of well-defined, bishop-based hierarchies in other denominations. It’s hard to sue Presbyterians.

Presenting symptom 2. Albany Presbytery’s interactions with Person B began after another presbytery received a written statement, the majority of which was the author’s allegations of multiple, wrongful behaviors by a minister who was a member of that presbytery. The presbytery responded by initiating a disciplinary investigation according to the *Book of Order*. Two paragraphs at the end of the eight-page statement contained assertions of criminal acts of SMAV by Person A, a minister and member of Albany. The wording connected Person B to those acts. Through the lens of the *Book of Order* disciplinary process, the wording implicated Person B as a potential witness against Person A.

Because Person was subject to Albany’s jurisdiction, the statement was forwarded to its Stated Clerk, a paid, professional staff position. (The role includes acting as secretary of the presbytery as a corporation, functioning as parliamentarian, and providing staff support in disciplinary case matters.) The Stated Clerk then made the crucial decision to declare that a disciplinary proceeding was being convened. The assumption was that the action was in accord with prescribed steps in the *Book of Order*.¹³ This was a major error. The document fails to meet the standards¹⁴ of what qualifies as a credible accusation sufficient to initiate an investigation:

- The author did not submit allegations against Person A; the statement only contains assertions which are vaguely worded and intended to alert ecclesiastical authorities rather than accuse. (By the Presbytery’s “Anti-Harassment, Sexual Misconduct, and Child & Youth Protection Policies,”

¹¹ F-3.0203, Gathered in Councils, p. 14.

¹² F-3.0208, Shared Power, Exercised Jointly, p. 14

¹³ D-7.0501, p. 173.

¹⁴ D-7.0102, p. 167. The required contents of an allegation is specified at D-7.0201c., p. 168.

the statement does not satisfy the elements of Appendix B, the form to be used when submitting an “alleged sexual misconduct offense.”¹⁵)

- The assertions are not based on first-hand knowledge or direct evidence; they only repeat another’s hearsay which that individual derived from others, i.e., third-hand information at best, and done without the source’s prior knowledge or permission, or any corroboration.

From a strictly pragmatic perspective, the investigation was never likely to achieve meaningful results:

- The *Book of Order* standard of proof necessary to find Person A guilty at trial of having committed disciplinary offenses is very high: “...the accused is guilty when a comparison and consideration of all the evidence compels an abiding conviction [by at least two-thirds of the commission conducting the trial] that the material facts necessary to prove the charge are true.”¹⁶ This burden of proof is daunting. It highly favors those who are accused.
- The lack of direct evidence and information from a fist-hand witness sorely limits what is available to the investigating committee. While hearsay evidence is permitted in the trial phase, the unit conducting the trial must “determine the credibility or weight of hearsay evidence.”¹⁷ Hearsay is not sufficient to persuade a trial commission that the charges are true.

By accepting an extremely low threshold to trigger a disciplinary proceeding, the requirements of which demand an extremely high degree of certainty to establish guilt, Albany Presbytery set in motion a flawed, legalistic dynamic which would frustrate many who were involved or affected.

With the consent of Person B, whose steadfast desire was to not serve as a witness in Albany’s proceedings, I presented my critique to the Stated Clerk and the sole remaining member of the six whom Albany appointed to the investing committee. It provided a rationale undergirding a request that Albany rescind its action to initiate the disciplinary investigation, an action which would clear the way for other, more realistic options to commence, e.g., a fact-finding inquiry which was not subject to onerous disciplinary proceeding constraints. The Stated Clerk admitted that he neither recognized the forwarded statement as containing assertions rather than allegations, nor recognized that the evidence source was entirely hearsay. He added that he was not aware of the *Book of Order* provisions on hearsay and was only generally familiar with the high burden of proof at trial. He was unaware of the precedent of

¹⁵ P. 27. The policy was approved by the Presbytery on 04/11/24. [Accessed 08/13/25: https://albanypresbytery.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/AP-Anti-Harassment-Sexual-Misconduct-Child_Youth-Protection-Policies.pdf]

¹⁶ Decision on Guilt, D-8.0902a., p. 195. [Note: My involvement in SMAV in ecclesiastical contexts began in 1995. Since that time, the only denomination I’ve found with this high burden of proof, in effect “beyond a reasonable doubt,” is the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).] The Church has resisted reform efforts to adopt a standard akin to “clear and convincing.”

¹⁷ D-8.0703, p. 193.

successful fact-finding, non-judicial inquiries in the Presbyterian Church for 20+ years. The remaining investigating committee member was even less informed on these points.

It is worth noting that at no time, to the best of my knowledge, did the Stated Clerk, members of the investigating committee, or any in Albany leadership positions contact law enforcement officials in the state where the acts as reported would have occurred. The question of whether the criminal statute of limitations had expired was apparently never raised internally, let alone an answer pursued.¹⁸

Analysis It very likely that the poor choices made by Albany's principals reflect varying degrees of individual ignorance, inexperience, naïveté, incompetence, and poor judgment regarding either SMAV matters or the Church model for a disciplinary proceeding. The likelihood dramatically increases when the two contexts intersect. However, deeper analysis points to the contribution of systemic factors.

▪ ***Polity***

- There is nothing in the *Book of Order* to serve as a resource which would prepare a Stated Clerk, an investigating committee, or the council conducting the disciplinary trial to perform their roles in a disciplinary proceeding. E.g., there is no appendix containing a bibliography or even a glossary.
- Historically, a singular resource manual was available for use in disciplinary proceedings throughout the denomination. Notably, its authorship was never the Presbyterian Church; it was only ever prepared by the Association of Stated Clerks, an independent, para-denominational group. The last revision of *Guide for Judicial Process*, October, 2011, is currently too out-of-date to be relevant.¹⁹
- There is no denominationally-endorsed criteria by which to select persons qualified to serve as members of an investigating committee. (Stated Clerks are often advised anecdotally to recruit an attorney as a member, especially an experienced trial litigator. Strikingly, in SMAV cases, this word-of-mouth networking omits professionals with experience in such cases who are licensed social workers, child protective service workers, law enforcement personnel, or mental health providers.)

¹⁸ The web site of RAINN (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network), a national anti-sexual violence organization, includes a state-by-state listing of criminal statutes of limitations. [Accessed 08/12/25: <https://rainn.org/about-sexual-assault>] My reading of the information for the specific state in which Person A is said to have committed a crime is that the time limit has not expired.

¹⁹ Based on personal communication since 2016 with staff in the national Church's Office of General Counsel, I understand this institutional out-sourcing of authorship was a legal risk management tactic to distance the Church as a corporation from civil liability. The *Guide* is posted on the Church's national web site. [Accessed 08/12/25: <https://pcusa.org/sites/default/files/guide-judicial-process.pdf>] I am not aware of the rationale for cessation of ongoing revision of the *Guide* after 2016. Cessation in this period, however, correlates with a decline in the number of disciplinary proceedings related to SMAV. (I am making a personal observation; the denomination does not collect case statistics.)

- There is no denominational-issued curricula for preparing an investigating committee. Typically, when a committee is convened the first time, the Stated Clerk provides an *orientation*, a term accurately denoting an event far less rigorous and comprehensive than what the term *training* connotes.
- In the Albany proceeding, the lack of qualified investigating committee members, compounded by the lack of training, compounded by the lack of resources, was acutely seen in members' failure to be aware of trauma-informed (TIC) principles or the need for TIC practices in a case involving SMAV. It was Person B who bore the sharp, adverse consequences of their individual and collective insensitivity.

▪ ***Culture***

- To state that Albany Presbytery was unprepared for a disciplinary proceeding involving SMAV is an understatement. This lack was intensified in a case in which the reported acts may have been criminal under state law. There were never signs that an infrastructure to support a case were in place prior to receipt of the original statement. An existing infrastructure could have given the Stated Clerk a pool of people with expertise to review and assess the forwarded statement before taking action, established the means to identify and select skilled investigating committee members, developed a robust training program on SMAV and disciplinary proceedings, and arranged for support resources to be available as needed for the duration of the proceeding.
- Albany's ***Culture*** has tolerated a passive avoidance of meaningful preparation for a disciplinary case of SMAV. In effect, this avoidance is an institutional system's denial of the possibility, regardless of any assumption or certainty that the probability is low. A risk management strategy is lacking.²⁰
- Another manifestation of Albany's tolerance of passive avoidance is the variance between commitments in its sexual misconduct policy and the experiences of Person B. The policy approved in 2024 mandates that a Response, Training & Compliance Team be appointed annually "to serve as the Response Team for allegations of Harassment, Sexual Misconduct, and Child Abuse reporting..."²¹ No Response Team has ever been appointed to function in the proceeding involving Person A. In the field of public policy, the gap between an institution's policy commitment and implementation is termed *policy drift*. However, that term refers to change over time. In the case of Person A and Albany's Response Team mandate, there was nothing to drift away from. Person B never benefitted from what Albany's policy mandated.²²

²⁰ This contrasts with Albany's web site post the Presbytery's "Disaster Preparedness & Response Plan," a 24 pp. document. [Accessed 08/13/25: https://s3.amazonaws.com/albanymedia/wp-content/uploads/sites/71/2016/09/Albany-Presbytery-Disaster-Preparedness-Plan-APPROVED-6_7_13.pdf]

²¹ Response, Training & Compliance section, p. 3. [Accessed 08/12/25: https://albanypresbytery.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/AP-Anti-Harassment-Sexual-Misconduct-Child_Youth-Protection-Policies.pdf]

²² As a feature of polity which is exercised at the discretion of a council, a presbytery in this instance, Response Teams are not a panacea. Albany's sexual misconduct policy assigns it "to work with (1) the

- What drives Albany's *Culture* of passive avoidance? I propose one explanation which is informed by my professional experience. Of my 40 years of employment as a minister, 30 were in health care settings (state psychiatric hospital, state center for people with developmental disabilities, and academic medical center). I draw upon participation in federally-funded mental health research, clinical care roles, and medical school and nursing school faculty appointments. I posit that Albany's passive avoidance is a defense mechanism, a primary clinical dynamic, which reveals the degree to which Albany is threatened in fourfold ways: fear of confrontation and conflict, in general, and particularly in an intense matter involving accusations and denials; apprehension about the unfamiliar disciplinary proceeding model of the Church, particularly when the stakes for the participants are so high; anxiety about matters related to sex and sexuality, particularly when instances of reprehensible abuse must be considered; facing the possible admission that this faith-based community is not as righteous or innocent as its self-identity perceives or as is presented to the public.

Commentary Considering the gravity of the statement's assertions and their inherent weaknesses, which are compounded by how poorly prepared Albany was to address the situation, it would have been reasonable and wiser for Albany to have responded instead with a preliminary inquiry which regarded Person A "person of interest" rather than one formally accused. A simple administrative action of this kind would have been unburdened by the complexities and complications of the formal disciplinary process. Albany had options. And options could have spared Person B from an excruciating series of negative experiences. And options could have given Person B choices beyond needing to expend tremendous energy in coping, self-advocating, and trying to educate.

Conclusion: Polity as the primary causal factor of systemic failure This section identifies the systemic failure's primary causal factor as *Polity* related to the conceptual model of a disciplinary proceeding. While Albany Presbytery is responsible for how it has been implemented the model, it is the one prescribed in the Church's *Book of Order* and thus applies throughout the denomination. The model

person making the complaint, (2) the accused, and (3) the affected governing body..." [Pg. 10, #4.] Its purpose is multi-faceted: "Ensure that an expeditious, professional, confidential, and caring response is made by the Presbytery to charges of sexual misconduct." [Pg. 12, #1.] How this is to be accomplished is not addressed. How members are to preserve confidentiality, which is not defined, regarding information from multiple sources on multiple matters is not addressed. There is no criteria for determining whether the qualities of "expeditious, professional, confidential, and caring" have been fulfilled. Over three decades of attempts to use the Response Team intervention in the Presbyterian Church, there is no standardized format. Anecdotally, there are reports of its utilization which resulted in members becoming ensnarled as witnesses, inserting themselves in ways which complicated an investigation, and disappointing persons who are survivors by not meeting reasonable expectations of what they were to accomplish.

is typical of that of a number of ecclesiastical institutions. Describing the non-specific ecclesiastical model creates a framework by which the Presbyterian model may be examined.

- I. Conceptually, the disciplinary proceeding model is based on U.S. secular criminal law.
 - A. The nature of the event under review is defined as the perpetrator's commission of a *rule violation*, i.e., the entity's constitution, by-laws as a non-profit corporation, policies, code of ethics or conduct, standards for certification or licensure, etc. [For some entities, the sole source of the rule is a sacred text.] The model is essentially based on a secular juristic construct.²³ This singular epistemology excludes the conceptualizations and practices from other professions and disciplines, a very short-sighted and counter-productive choice.²⁴
 1. Characteristics of the model.
 - a. It is *atheological*, i.e., without theology. There is no framework or foundation which derives from an explicit theology or ethics, whether the substantive source is orthodox or liberationist. To cite on example, there is no integration of the significant work of feminist and womanist (African American feminists) theologians whose original scholarship has contributed immensely to the comprehensive study of the relevant issues.
 - b. It is intrinsically offender-oriented, i.e., not victim-oriented.
 - i. The key question: Did the person accused commit an offense by violating a rule, and can it be proven according to the institution's standard of evidence?
 - ii. There is an emphasis on the person accused's due process rights, e.g., presumption of innocence, representation by an advocate or attorney, cross-examination of witnesses, etc. Witnesses' rights are fewer and less robust.
 - iii. The resolution of the intervention proceeding centers on the outcome for the person accused and whether a type of discipline will be imposed.
 - c. It minimizes the significance of critical contextual factors.
 - i. It ignores the intersection of the toxic dynamics of misogyny (devaluing women), patriarchy (valuing men), devaluing of children and adolescents, and clericalism (valuing of the office of the cleric, i.e., minister).

²³ As a legal model, it is narrowly adversarial, promotes resolution through settlements, and ignores contributions from the contemporary legal scholarship regarding therapeutic justice and transitional justice. It ignores the four-fold understanding of truth – empiric or forensic, personal or narrative, social or dialogue, healing and restorative – as utilized in: South Africa Truth and Reconciliation Commission. (1999). 'Truth,' paragraphs 29-45, in Chapter 5, "Concepts and Principles," *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report*, Volume 1, pp. 110-114. [Accessed 07/08/25: <https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/report/>]

²⁴ A very notable omission is that of the perspective of, and insights from, clinical mental health providers and researchers, e.g., Judith Herman's groundbreaking work on Complex Post-Traumatic Stress.

- ii. It fails to consider the conceptual model of asymmetrical power in a role relationship within an institutional setting, including the entity's sanction of the individual in the entity's power role, and the inherent fiduciary responsibility to exercise power for the best interests of the individual who is vulnerable.
 - iii. One of its outcomes is to perpetuate and reinforce the structural, systemic, and cultural patterns which contribute to incidences of SMAV.
 - v. Another outcome is the lack of justice for the person who was victimized.
 - d. The offender-centered focus fails to address the culpability of people in leadership positions within the entity, those who aided or abetted the actions and inactions resulting in harm, and the contributions of the entity's polity. In addition, it fails to address institutional accountability.
 - e. The model's primary means of resolution of a contested allegation is a trial. Typically, the primary actors are attorneys, some of whom are paid and some who are volunteers. The potential burden of expenses disincentivizes those representing a presbytery to avoid the trial phase and incentivizes efforts to settle the case through compromises. Proffered concessions typically work to the advantage of the person accused of SMAV and against those who are survivors.
 - f. In a case of SMAV in which the person accused is a minister, original jurisdiction originates with a presbytery. The model allows that individual to appeal a finding of guilt to the judicial unit of the next higher council, a synod. If that appeal is denied, the individual is allowed to appeal that decision to the next higher judicial unit, the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission. The potential costly expenses of these appeals are a disincentive to a presbytery's pursuit of resolving the case through the adversarial model's feature of a contested trial.
 - g. For survivors of SMAV, the prospect of functioning as a witness in a contested trial is a serious barrier to participation. Anticipated stressors include encountering the person accused, enduring a confrontational and intimidating cross-examination, and unwanted disclosure of highly sensitive and intimate personal information. The trial feature of the model disincentivizes participation by survivors of SMAV.
- B. The nature of the event is not defined as a *relational betrayal of a Person*, a breach of trust, and, in the case of an ecclesiastically-sanctioned leadership role, a breach of fiduciary trust.
- 1. Characteristics of the model in relation to the Person victimized.
 - a. The personhood and autonomy or agency of the individual who was victimized is minimally recognized.
 - i. The individual is not entitled to the same due process rights as that of the person accused.
 - ii. The individual's formal role in the proceeding is that of a witness, and not that of a party, unlike the status the person accused.

- iii. A designated unit of the entity investigates and prosecutes the case, exercising its authority to make decisions which may not represent the position, wants, or needs of the individual who was victimized.
- b. Defining the nature of the event as behaviors by consenting adults (e.g., as adultery) is a construct which contradicts the ethical principle that a person's capacity to meaningfully consent includes having been fully informed of benefits and risks of the choices, making an independent decision without pressure or influence, and participating from a mutual position of status and power.
- c. Ignoring the *relational betrayal* ignores the fiduciary nature of the relationship as rooted in trust and as existing for the sake of the person who is not in the sanctioned role. Ignoring this constituent factor ignores the potential serious consequences for the person who was victimized in the following domains: spiritual, religious, familial, social, occupational, economic, psychological, physical, and behavioral.
- d. Ignoring the *relational betrayal* includes ignoring the betrayal by the institution.
- e. Historically, the model has excluded affected individuals and communities, e.g., family of the person victimized and the faith-based community in which the events occurred.

II. Defects of the model (not in cardinal order)

- A. Typically, the Rule-based polity model is not conceptually or methodologically consistent.
 - 1. It is a mix of secular legal constructs and practices with some religious precepts and principles.
 - 2. Its terms are frequently vague or undefined.
 - a. The result is that the means which guide and control the intervention are difficult to understand by those who participate in, or are affected by, the proceeding.
 - b. Lack of specificity of terms results in varying interpretations by participants. Participants with greater standing by a designated role or personal influence possess the capacity to shape the proceeding in ways contrary to interpretations by others. This can lead quickly to experiences of frustration, conflict, and mistrust.
 - c. The resulting power imbalance creates a dependency for persons who were victimized on others, which undermines their agency and autonomy, or necessitates their considerable investment of time and energy to self-advocate.
- B. The Rule-based polity intervention, typically an investigation, contains a high commitment to due process rights of the individual who is accused of the violation, and an unequal, lesser commitment to process guarantees and protections for persons participate in the formal role of witnesses.
 - 1. A guarantee of confidentiality extended to the individual accused can result in a barrier to alerting those who may be at current risk of harm, reaching out to locate others with relevant knowledge, and countering attempts by third parties to pressure witnesses.

- C. The *Polity* ethos regarding the Rule-violation model emphasizes and values compliance with procedure, and concurrently devalues Victim-Centered, Trauma-Informed Care principles and best practices for persons who have been victimized.
- D. That the model is the best means of intervention in a matter involving SMAV is unsubstantiated by evidence, whether quantitative or qualitative.
1. Indicators of the ineffectiveness of this model as a polity intervention include:
 - a. prolonged delays between the commission of SMAV and the person victimized coming forward to the ecclesiastical institution to disclose;
 - b. attrition over time of the number of SMAV disclosures and the number of cases resolved by the formal means of a proceeding.
- E. The intervention rescues ecclesiastical institutions from their ongoing failure to address their discomfort with, and avoidance of, engaging in conflict and holding each other accountable by professed standards and norms.
1. Reliance on this structured means for resolving tensions in cases of SMAV substitutes for an intervention more aligned with the faith-based community's professed self-identity and convictions.
- F. The existing ethos of the intervention does not embody a true or realistic sense of institutional complicity in SMAV incidents. The tragic flaw is the institution's hubris regarding its righteousness, innocence, and good intentions. The false pride reflects the lack of reflexivity, or critical self-examination, its spiritual blindness, and the failure of its moral imagination.
1. The result is an ethos of cheap grace and cheap forgiveness, dismissal of the necessity of authentic remorse and repentance by the offender, and omission of meaningful healing and recovery for persons victimized and affected communities.
- G. Implementation of the intervention is infested by practical flaws.
1. Historically, one subgroup of those guiding the intervention have been authorized without training, experience, or knowledge about the proceeding itself or SMAV.
 - a. Inexperience, incompetence, and ignorance result in unwitting re-victimization.
 2. Another subgroup guiding the intervention have been those whose professional identity is that of a lawyer.
 - b. This demographic, particularly when that of a litigator, is often experienced as aggressive, controlling, and biased. The result is often an uncaring re-victimization.
- H. Typically, the proceeding is under-resourced.
- Lack of adequate financial support, e.g., to retain an expert witness or consultant.
 - Lack of an infrastructure.
 - Imposition of deadlines limits time available to pursue the case to the degree that it deserves.

- I. The polity intervention of the proceeding can be easily manipulated to promote what has been termed the “institutional protection agenda.”²⁵
- J. There is no built-in mechanism for a post-resolution critical review for the purposes of documentation, assessment, learning, and quality improvement.²⁶
 - 1. A consequence is the lack of a database, an inability to access an archival source, and a lack of continuity of pre-existing material should new material regarding a case be obtained.
 - 2. This absence reinforces an avoidance of prevention measures and promotes a reactive strategy which is activated only after SMAV is discovered.²⁷

The model used by Albany reinforces and perpetuates, by default, the existing polity’s **Cultural** patterns of misogyny, patriarchy, devaluing of children and youth, and clericalism, all of which are significant contributors to pre-conditions which permit commission of SMAV.

²⁵ The phrase is from Marie M. Fortune, a highly influential advocate and educator on SMAV in faith-based communities. She used it throughout her presentations and publications. See, e.g.: Fortune, Marie M. (2019, September 25). Wolves in Shepherds’ Clothing: The Failures of Institutional Churches. Posted on the World Wide Web site of the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs, Georgetown University, Washington, D.C.

²⁶ Beyond the forensic autopsy or the hospital’s morbidity and mortality conference, secular examples of a standardized review after a deleterious event include the work conducted by the National Transportation Safety Board. Rare is the ecclesiastical institution which conducts a careful, structured, and outcome-oriented critique of its interventions. Even the basic problem-solving methodologies (LEAN, PDSA, Six Sigma) of *quality improvement*, used for decades in business and manufacturing, are ignored.

²⁷ The fact that the Presbyterian Church tolerates widespread de-prioritization of developing and implementing prevention measures and practices, let alone a comprehensive SMAV prevention strategy, is missing from council agendas. This is especially clear when comparing the Presbyterian status to denominations with hierarchical structures which have established an internal liability insurance company and require denominational entities to obtain coverage from that in-house company. Those companies are able to require satisfaction of rigorous prevention measures as a condition of coverage. [See, e.g., the Episcopal Church’s Church Pension Group and its risk management program which includes abuse prevention. [Accessed 08/15/25: <https://www.cpg.org>] The Presbyterian Church has no internal liability insurance company. Each of its four types of councils is free to choose its own carrier.]

Disordered: Toward Recommendations

Introduction

Not decent, not orderly

Prominent 20th century business management theorist and consultant, Peter Drucker, is reputed to be the source of the adage, “Culture eats strategy for breakfast.” The corporate-world truism explains why top-down, unilaterally-imposed strategies fail in businesses. However, in a recently concluded judicial case of sexual misconduct, abuse, and violence (SMAV), Albany Presbytery’s strategy, i.e., administrative governance policies and procedures, failed because the strategy was determined by a failed culture. The case exposed Albany’s culture as neither *victim-centered* nor *trauma-informed*. Revealed was the inordinate degree to which a dominating hermeneutic, “decently and in order,” drove Albany representatives’ decisions and the ways their choices were implemented.

If the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) had a family crest, “decently and in order” qualifies as a family motto. The phrase originates in a biblical passage, I Corinthians 14:4,²⁸ part of a 6th century Common Era letter to the Christian community in Corinth, Greece. The letter addresses doctrinal, ethical, and practical issues dividing the community. The passage sets a standard – “decently and in order” – for how church governance is exercised. Contemporary Presbyterians invoke the phrase in ways which vary with the speaker’s intent. Ubiquity and variations are symptomatic of the construct’s influence.

- Descriptively, it points to authority for decision-making as neither congregational (vested in a local congregation) nor episcopal (vested in a hierarchy of bishops presiding over multiple congregations), but as power entrusted to an intermediate governing body of both laity and ministers expected to work collaboratively on behalf of the collective community.²⁹
- Educationally, it explains procedure, i.e., “how to,” and empowers participants to act.³⁰ (Procedure also includes burdensome *Robert’s Rules of Order* to conduct formal meetings.)
- Used ironically, it warns that procedural entanglement is displacing intended outcomes.

²⁸ Source accessed 09/29/25:

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20Corinthians%2014%3A40&version=NRSVUE>

²⁹ National Church source accessed 09/29/25: <https://pcusa.org/news-storytelling/news/2022/5/3/decently-and-order>

³⁰ Presbytery source accessed 09/29/25: <https://chicagopresbytery.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/48/2023/08/The-Basics-of-Presbyterian-Polity-Presbyterian-Leader-1.pdf>

- It appears as tongue-in-cheek.³¹

Toward Vestry Laight's recommendations

The premise of this submission is that Albany's governance culture regarding SMAV matters is overly-dependent on the denomination's culture which orients governance to formal Church law and rules. The norm for achieving the biblical standard of "decently and in order" is compliance. Even though the original biblical phrase refers to a means for how ends are accomplished, Albany's responses to the SMAV case inverted Church law's means to be Albany's ends. The case exposed this legalistic hermeneutic as both *Unrighteous* and *Disordered*, outcomes woefully antonymous to Albany's "goal of responding in a survivor-centered trauma informed [sic] way to abuse victims," per Letter of Agreement, June 29, 2025, Exhibit A, Background paragraph, p. 5. This submission complements a prior analysis, *Unrighteous* (08/13/25 rev.), which identified systemic factors in Albany's responses. Both documents are a set offered to Vestry Laight LLC for its independent investigation and recommendations, per Letter of Agreement, Project paragraph, pg. 5. This critique is a way to acknowledge Albany's commendable decision to initiate an independent investigation for the sake of improvement.

The two basic governance sources for a presbytery disciplinary case of SMAV are the denomination's *Book of Order* and a presbytery's sexual misconduct policy. The *Book of Order*, Part II of the Church constitution, has the status of Church-wide law. Albany's policies are extra-constitutional. This submission examines Albany's governance culture, per its 2024 policy, "Anti-Harassment, Sexual Misconduct, and Child/Youth Protection Policies."³² A metaphor clarifies why this is the sole focus.

Contemporary neuroscience has identified risk factors for developing Alzheimer's disease as including genetic inheritance and genetic variations, age, environment, and lifestyle. The last two – environment and lifestyle choices – are those most within our individual control to modify so as to possibly prevent disease onset or mitigate consequences. Albany's genetic inheritance, its DNA, is determined by the constitutional status of the *Book of Order*. That DNA determines **judicial** polity in a formal proceeding regarding disciplinary offenses. However, to scapegoat *Book of Order* DNA deflects attention from Albany's modifiable risk factors. That avoidance perpetuates adverse outcomes. Albany can choose how it implements the *Book of Order*. Its "Anti-Harassment, Sexual Misconduct, and Child/Youth Protection Policies" is **administrative** polity, the one within its authority and discretion to compose, revise, or apply.

³¹ Source accessed 09/29/25: <https://www.ebay.com.au/itm/226411898169> See a Church publication by a highly-regarded former Stated Clerk of the national Church: Kirkpatrick, Clifton, & Hopper, Jr., William H. (1997). "Presbyterians Do It Decently and in Order: Our Polity." Chapter 11 in What Unites Presbyterian: Common Ground for Troubled Times. Louisville, KY: Geneva Press.

³² Source accessed 09/29/25: https://albanypresbytery.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/AP-Anti-Harassment-Sexual-Misconduct-Child_Youth-Protection-Policies.pdf

The term **administrative** polity is used to differentiate it from the **judicial** polity of the Presbyterian Church. The distinction is crucial for identifying what is within Albany's power to change internally (its administrative governance, i.e., its policy and practices) and what is not (the denomination's judicial polity, i.e., its disciplinary proceedings, including investigations).

There is also a pragmatic reason for concentrating on Albany's governance. To amend *Book of Order* provisions which adversely affect people who are survivors of SMAV is a significantly long process, even when ultimately successful. If an Albany proposal, termed an "overture," to amend the Church constitution was approved at the next General Assembly, mid-2026, the resultant proposed amendment, if approved by a majority of presbyteries, would not take effect until mid-2027. What can be improved in the least amount of time is Albany's **administrative** governance.

Exhibits

The following **Exhibits** illustrate themes derived from Albany's responses in the SMAV case formally concluded in September, 2025. These are a select set of samples and not a comprehensive compilation. They point to flaws and can inform recommendations for Albany's improvement. That said, it cannot be overemphasized that Albany Presbytery's problematic responses are not unique. Albany is not the proverbial one bad presbytery apple in a big Presbyterian barrel of ripe, healthy ones. While the particulars of Albany responses were unique to the individual participants and circumstances, the systemic factors and dynamics, emphatically, transcend Albany Presbytery. Accessed 10/01/25, the source of all citations in the **Exhibits** is: https://albanypresbytery.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/AP-Anti-Harassment-Sexual-Misconduct-Child_Youth-Protection-Policies.pdf

Exhibit 1.

Rule-oriented violations vs. Betrayals of trust and violations of persons

The opening sentence of the “Albany Presbytery Sexual Misconduct Policy” states that it “prohibits sexual misconduct of any kind, and [that it] will take appropriate and immediate action in response to complaints of [sic] knowledge of violations of this policy.”³³

- The term “sexual misconduct” implicitly refers to the person accused. There is no mention of those affected directly, e.g., one who is a survivor, or indirectly, e.g., a congregation in which the offense occurred. Albany has chosen to center the offender.
- The term “violations of this policy” is rule-oriented. It is not language which refers to those whose trust was betrayed by one functioning in a role sanctioned by Albany or one whose personhood was violated. The essential constructs of relational betrayal and betrayal of trust in a fiduciary-type of role-based context are absent. There is no mention of traumatic outcomes for the person who is the survivor of the “violations of this policy,” e.g., debilitating experiences of having been sexually exploited, emotionally and psychologically manipulated, coerced, or inappropriately shamed and blamed. There is no acknowledgement that the risk of resisting “sexual misconduct” by a pastor or religious leader is to cede the potential of receiving spiritual support from a sanctioned authority figure. Rule-oriented, offender-centered language does not name the asymmetrical power dynamics or tactics like grooming so central to the survivor’s experiences and the sequela of enduring harms.

In short, there are no descriptors or cues to signal to a survivor that their experience are recognized, understood, or can be validated by Albany. Absence of *victim-centered* or *person-centered* language is victim-excluding. Displacement reinforces the lack of judicial standing of a survivor in a formal disciplinary proceeding other than as a witness, a strictly instrumental function and subject to the discretion of the investigating committee. Albany policy’s introductory paragraph reflects the rule-oriented policy title and reinforces the culture’s focus.

While the policy may condemn SMAV acts, there is no affirmative language stating that a person, especially a minor or an adult who lacks capacity to consent, has a right to be free from SMAV. The definition of “Child sexual abuse” (pg. 9) focuses only on the offender. To compound omission of language about people who are vulnerable, there is no mention of the demographic of a person who is a chronological adult and lacks capacity to meaningfully consent. “decently and in order” in Albany’s administrative governance reflects a rule-oriented, offender-centered culture, as does Church law, and does not actively welcome and encourage persons to come forward and disclose.³⁴

³³ See pg. 9, first paragraph. Was the wording intended to be “complaints or knowledge”?

³⁴ The long practice of silencing people who experienced SMAV in the denomination was lamented in 2020 in an appeal by the Stated Clerk of the national Church. Accessed 10/08/25:

Exhibit 2.

Editorial lapses or *Scope of practice*?

To be charitable, errors in Albany’s “Sexual Misconduct Policy” are editorial lapses. However, some are significant enough to raise doubts about whether Albany’s *scope of practice*³⁵ is sufficient to address crucial topics which have secular law and risk management implications. Four errors illustrate.

- (1.) The definition of “Child sexual abuse” in the Policy excludes the possibility that the person whose behavior is identified as abusive is a legal minor.³⁶ Omitted is the reality of minor-to-minor acts of abuse, a phenomenon documented as occurring in Presbyterian churches. The absence of a more inclusive definition disincentivizes people coming forward to disclose knowledge regarding minors who have been abused by minors. There is no door here, let an open door, to invite disclosure.
- (2.) The definition of “Child sexual abuse” uses “under the age of 18” in relation to the demographic of “child.”³⁷ However, since 2000, the legal age of consent for sexual contact in New York is 17 years old. If Albany intends to use New York State’s legal language, this Policy misinformation requires correction.³⁸ If Albany is creating its own definition of the age of consent, its choice should be clearly identified so as to reduce confusion.
- (3.) As noted above, the definitions in the Policy omit the demographic of “adults with vulnerabilities,” a *Book of Order* (2025-2027) category mandated for all presbytery policies to address.³⁹ A definition of “adults with vulnerabilities” would realistically include a person whose chronological

<https://pcusa.org/news-storytelling/news/2020/1/22/stated-clerk-urges-churches-enforce-sexual-misconduct-policies> Rule-oriented, offender-centered policies are a way that silencing occurs.

Silencing as an outcome leads many to conclude that this is symptomatic of an institutional-protection agenda, whether deliberately or unwittingly pursued by leaders.

³⁵ *Scope of practice* is a construct defining the what a licensed health professional is qualified to perform. The construct sets the limits of a practitioners’ expertise.

³⁶ See pg. 9, Definitions.

³⁷ See pg. 9, Definitions.

³⁸ *Consolidated Laws of New York*, Chapter 40, Penal, Title H, Offenses Against the Person Involving Physical Injury, Sexual Conduct, Restraint and Intimidation, Part 3, Specific Provisions, Section § 130.05, Sex offenses; lack of consent.

³⁹ Interim Unified Agency. (2025). Form of Government, Chapter Three, General Principles of Councils, G-3.01, Disciplinary Process, G-3.0106, Administration of Mission. In *Book of Order* (2025-2027). Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, p. 48. Accessed 09/27/25: https://www.pcusa.org/sites/default/files/2025-07/2025_0625_Book_of_Order_Interactive_2025-2027.pdf

age is that of a legal adult, but whose cognitive capacity does not permit the act of informed, freely given, and meaningful consent. A more realistic and comprehensive definition would include situational contexts, e.g., vulnerability-induced experiences of duress or stress, and impairment due to consumption of an incapacitating substance. While omission of “adults with vulnerabilities” fails to comply with the *Book of Order* mandate, more important is the exclusion of people who are part of Albany’s congregations and the disincentivizing of a person who is a survivor of such abuse from coming forward to disclose. If Albany does not name the demographic category, it does not communicate that Albany can validate that survivor’s experience of SMAV.

(4.) The Policy uses certain formal terms in Church law in confusing ways. (Trying to describe this confusion is itself a confusing task.) The Policy section on “Procedures and Implementation” uses three very significant terms – *complaint*, *allegation*, *accusation* – and their variations in ways which introduce unnecessary distortion.

- *accusation* and its variants are used in General Principles (pg.13), Allegation (pg. 14), The Role of the Response Team (pp. 14-15), Initial Report (pp. 15-16), The Role of the Investigating Committee (pg. 16), Unsupported Allegations (pg. 17), Requests for Transfer... (pg. 20), and Appendix B (pg. 27).
- *allegation* and its variants are interspersed throughout the Policy. In some instances, this occurs within the same section in which *accusation* is used; see especially, Appendix B, Statement of Alleged Sexual Misconduct Offense (pg. 27). In other instances, *accusation* and *allegation* appear to be synonymous terms. Inconsistencies in usage are aggravated by the use of *complaint* and its variants which are also interspersed. In other instances, *accusation* and *allegation* are used as distinct from each other: see especially Allegation, d. (pg. 14) in which the wording describes the situation of an *allegation* which results in a written *accusation*. Here, the differentiated terms place the SMAV matter in the realm of a formal disciplinary proceeding according to the *Book of Order*.

Albany procedure here does not comply with the *Book of Order* Church Discipline section governing judicial proceedings for disciplinary offenses. D-7.0201c and D-7.0201d. describe the constitutionally-mandated contents and format for filling an allegation, and the path of the filing process. The use of accusation is only at D-7.02 and the uncommon situation of a self-accusation. Albany’s Policy regarding a response to *allegation* contradicts the very clear procedural requirement of D-7.0501, that when the Stated Clerk of the presbytery receives an *allegation*, the statement is referred “promptly to an investigating committee, which shall conduct an inquiry...”

In a matter of SMAV, this confusion immediately confronts and confounds those with reason to come forward with questions, concerns, or reports, but are hesitant to proceed, or are uncertain about how to approach Albany. Is the tripwire for an Albany investigation an *accusation* or an *allegation*? What is the weight of a *complaint*? How does one alert authorities to a potential

serious problem without becoming a formal *accuser* or witness? Is an oral statement different than a written statement, and, if so, how? And who decides?

Are the above commissions and omissions a product of inattentive editing? Or are these due to a lack of awareness, knowledge, and skill? Either has implications affecting people who are survivors or who have information to disclose and must weigh the benefits and costs of coming forward. To the degree that Albany leaders do not achieve accuracy, clarity, and consistency in advance of a SMAV matter, it will be that much more difficult to do so after the matter is discovered.⁴⁰

Exhibit 3.

Threshold for responding: Rule-oriented vs. Person-centered

For persons who consider approaching Albany regarding an SMAV matter, the threshold to be crossed, i.e., the basis which activates Albany responses, is not welcoming, at best. In fact, the threshold is actively discouraging. At worst, it is a barrier. Multiple reasons reinforce the disincentives.

- (1.) A presbytery website is typically the most accessible and public source for locating its threshold for responding to SMAV. Finding Albany’s threshold takes a hard-to-find, non-intuitive path.
 - a. Start at the Presbytery website home page, accessed 10/10/25: <https://albanypresbytery.org>
 - b. Select the button for “Resources.”
 - c. On the “Resources” page, select the button for “Policies, Manuals, Handbooks.”
 - d. On the “Policies, Manual, Handbooks” page, see “Presbytery Guidelines & Policies.”
 - e. Choose from a list of 14 links to documents, 6 of which use either “sexual misconduct” or “sexual harassment” in the title. (The 6 are not in a dedicated grouping; they are scattered among the list of 14. Some of the 6 use “Policy” in the title; some don’t.) Of the 6, 3 use “TEMPLATE for church use” in their title, and 2 use “NYS Combatting Sexual Harassment” in their title. Of the 6, 1 uses the title, “Anti-Harassment, Sexual Misconduct & Child Safety Policies.” While this is the source of Albany’s threshold, the title omits the name of Albany; that this is Albany’s is only evident after opening the document. Only after reading the 36-pp. document is a threshold discovered. There is no index.
 - f. If one seeks to by-pass searching through layers of Albany’s website, its search feature is an option. Using “sexual abuse” as the search term yields 0 results. Using “sexual misconduct” as the search term yields 3, 1 of which is the “Policies, Manuals, Handbooks” page. Discovery now continues per step e. above.

⁴⁰ “When did Noah build the ark...? Before the rain. Before the rain.” Spoken by the character of Nathan Muir, a Central Intelligence Agency case officer played by Robert Redford, in the fictional movie, *Spy Game*. (2001).

Comment: If a person entered the sanctuary of a congregation in Albany Presbytery and detected smoke or flames, the fire department would not expect the individual to have searched a first responder website, located a policy, and finally discovered the threshold for responses.

- (2.) Exhibit 2 documented problems with particular Policy terms important to Albany’s threshold for responding. Even if the terminology was accurate, clear, and consistent, the format of the policy does not encourage any person, especially one who is a survivor, to come forward and take the risks of being disbelieved, dismissed, blamed, rejected, or ostracized. 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. The format rewards those who are steeped in Presbyterian polity and disempowers those who are. It creates a dependency on Albany staff, especially a Stated Clerk.
- There are no accompanying visual aids, e.g., a flow chart or decision tree.
 - There are no links to the *Book of Order*, which is posted on both the Albany website and the national PC(U.S.A.) website.
 - There is no mention of what the person coming forward can expect. There is no table of pros/benefits and cons/costs. Potentially long timetables are not mentioned.
 - The trajectory of the Policy text moves toward a formal disciplinary proceeding, just like the *Book of Order*. Because the PC(U.S.A.)’s standard for determining guilt is that of beyond a reasonable doubt, a criminal standard in secular law, the Policy emphasis of *complaint, allegation, and accusation*, per Exhibit 2, aligns with the priority of receiving information in writing, and functioning as a formal witness. Participation according to Albany’s procedures means accepting a great deal of responsibility in a very uncertain and ambiguous situation. The Policy does not reflect the secular first responders’ request, “If you see something, say something,” which does not exclude the participation of anonymous sources or receipt of partial information. Albany’s high threshold for responding aligns with the high standard for establishing guilt, an outcome which depends on activating a disciplinary investigation. This alignment disincentives people from coming forward with potentially relevant information.

Comment: If a person entered the sanctuary of a congregation in Albany Presbytery, detected smoke, and called the fire department, the dispatcher would neither require filing a written statement nor demand certainty about a fire’s existence. A good faith, reasonable act of communicating information does not constitute intentionally submitting a false alarm.⁴¹

- If Albany has options to offer which are short of a full judicial case, they are missing from the Policy. The anchor for the text is the formal disciplinary proceeding model in the *Book of Order*. A significant percentage of people who come forward with concerns about SMAV in a religious

⁴¹ *Consolidated Laws of New York*, Penal Law, Part 3, Title N, Article § 240.50, Falsely reporting an incident in the third degree.

community are not interested in triggering a formal investigation. Frequently, the intent is to stop SMAV underway, or prevent harm to people who are at risk. This has been documented in fact-finding inquiries sponsored by the national Church and by presbyteries.

- There is no inclusion of resources the person could utilize, e.g., a reading list or bibliography, or an independent support and/or advocacy organization.
- There is nothing to suggest, let alone describe, that Albany's representatives will operate from trauma-informed principles and practices.
- For a person considering coming forward with a question or presenting a concern or submitting information regarding an incident of SMAV, there are no names or contact information for the roles identified as sources to approach.
- As one potential response, the Policy assigns a significant role to its Response, Training & Compliance Team (RTCT). There is no link to an online source which identifies who the members are, and how they were recruited or chosen. There is nothing which gives their relevant background and training. The Policy assigns specific functions to be performed. There is no information as to which individual member will perform which specific function. A more welcoming format could include brief statements from each which are presented in a video format. Like the *Book of Order*, the Policy is a dense, one-dimensional text and demands a high literacy. A multi-media format would help reduce the intimidating construct of the current Albany threshold, and do more to invite people's participation.
- The Policy format's tone and style communicates no sense of Albany's identity as caring about people who are vulnerable. The language refers to demographic categories – the victim, the accuser, the accused – which ignores an individual's personhood, which is greater than a demographic category. There is no person-to-person expression of cultural humility which acknowledges that matters of SMAV are stressful, difficult, and challenging, and that Albany may make mistakes in responding. There is nothing to express Albany's desire or commitment to analyze and learn from the experience for the sake of fulfilling commitments to justice, accountability, and recovery. Any sense of a spiritual motivation which reflects Albany's identity as a religious community is subsumed by the legalistic format. A person who intends to come forward and disclose is required to trust Albany procedure without Albany having even sought to establish a basis for that trust.

Comment: If a person entered the sanctuary of a congregation in Albany Presbytery and detected smoke or flames, the format for how to approach the fire department about its response is simple to understand and to enact: call 911.

Toward Recommendations

Cloning is not a panacea

- Beginning in the 1990s, all presbyteries and sessions of congregations are required by PC(U.S.A.) law to “adopt and implement” a sexual misconduct policy, per *Book of Order (2025-2027)*, G-30106. The requirement of G-3.0106 does not specify criteria for the contents or standards to be achieved.
 - Regarding the “adopt” requirement, the pattern of enactment is very clear. The dominant priority is to achieve compliance. The prevailing means is to clone another presbytery’s existing policy and procedure. Albany facilitates the use of cloning for compliance. Its “Policy Writing Workshop,” which is announced on its website calendar for November 1, 2025,⁴² is offered to sessions of congregations so they meet their “adopt and implement” requirement. The announcement indicates that “a template for congregations to use” is available. Strikingly, without any benefit of the forthcoming Vestry Laight report, it appears that Albany is choosing to perpetuate its flaws (see Exhibit 2 above) through its “TEMPLATE for church use – Anti-Harassment, Sexual Misconduct & Child Safety Policies.”⁴³ The text begins at the top of pg. 1: “This template version is based on the policies adopted by Albany Presbytery during the 347th Stated Meeting on April 11, 2024.” The way that presbyteries and sessions utilize cloning sacrifices engagement, critical analysis, the necessary struggle to truly learn, and the result of quality for the sake of compliance. The proverbial box is checked without looking at what is inside. *Caveat emptor*, Albany sessions.
- Regarding the “implement” requirement, the pattern is also very clear.
 - Ongoing, regular, and structured review to ensure the currency and quality of the policy, e.g., so that it integrates changes in secular law or new consensus best practices, is typically a very low priority.
 - Albany’s Policy typifies so many others in the PC(U.S.A.) in that there is no provision for a post-incident or post-judicial proceeding review conducted to assess Albany’s responses, identify weaknesses, learn, and design ways to improve future outcomes. After implementing the intervention phase, there is no means in place by which to implement a postvention phase.
 - The framework of the adopted policies is predictably reactive, i.e., how the presbytery will respond after it discovers an SMAV matter. What is predictability de-emphasized is a preventive phase. (Those presbyteries most serious about prevention are those which have been sued, experienced costly judicial cases, endured a criminal proceeding, seen a congregation torn asunder, or lived through unwanted media attention.) Thus, “implement” is perceived as a latent function, an event occurring when the reactive portions align with disciplinary investigations and judicial proceedings when triggered by discovery. An example of Albany’s de-prioritization of implementation is the fact that its Response Team, an intervention described in its Policy, was not available in the recently concluded disciplinary investigation. Members had not been recruited, appointed, trained, or activated. It existed only on paper as “adopted.”

⁴² Source accessed 10/13/25: <https://albanypresbytery.org/calendar/>

⁴³ Source accessed 10/13/25: <https://albanypresbytery.org/resources/policies-manuals-handbooks/>

Why are there these dismaying patterns? Participants who offer critical observations and astute analyses cite multiple factors. *Discomfort with topics related to sexuality. Unease with conflict and confrontation. Lack of information. Myths about people who are survivors. Lack of experience. Exclusion of expertise and knowledge from non-religious sources, professionals, and disciplines. Fear of making mistakes with legal or risk management implications. Overreliance on unqualified peers based on their role status or personal relationships. Historic influences of misogyny, devaluing of children and youth, clericalism, and patriarchy.* The list is long. Because of the power of embedded informational deficits and attitudinal resistance, Albany's culture, and therefore its administrative governance, will not meaningfully change if the report's recommendations, however sound and *victim-centered* and *trauma-informed*, are too reliant on policy and procedural revisions. More than a new box for Albany to check is needed.

Explore a new methodology

This submission points to new methodological paths for Albany to pursue.

- (1.) There is no indication in the recently concluded disciplinary case that Albany has learned from the extensive research-based literature regarding the situational prevention strategy model. International scholars and practitioners of criminology, law enforcement, forensic psychology, public health, and sociology have applied insights from the model to cases of sexual abuse of children in religious communities. The literature can be studied and references pursued.⁴⁴ The lessons from this culture, so different from Albany's, are readily transferrable to the context of

⁴⁴ A sample illustrates.

- Giardino, Angelo P., Vieth, Victor, Berkovits, Shira, & Pitkoff, Danielle. (2021). "Child Abuse Prevention in the Faith-Based Environment." Chapter in Palusci, Vincent J., Vandervort, Frank E., Greydanus, Donald E., & Merrick, Joav. *Preventing Child Abuse: Critical Roles and Multiple Perspectives*. Hauppauge, NY: Nova Science Publishers, Inc., pp. 249-266.
- Kaufman, Keith L., Erooga, Marcus, Matthews, Ben, & McConnell, Erin. (2019). Recommendations for preventing child sexual abuse in youth-serving organizations: Implications from an Australian Royal Commission review of the literature. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 34(20):4199-4224.
- Matthews, Ben. (2017). Optimising implementation of reforms to better prevent and respond to child sexual abuse in institutions: Insights from public health, regulatory theory and Australia's Royal Commission. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 74:86-98.
- Smallbone, Stephen, & McKillop Nadine. (2015). "Preventing Child Sexual Abuse: A Place-Based Approach." Chapter 5 in Smaal, Yorick, Kaladelfos, Andy, & Finnane, Mark. (Eds.). *The Sexual Abuse of Children: Recognition and Redress*. Melbourne, Australia: Monash University Publishing, pp. 61-77.
- Terry, Karen J., & Ackerman, Alissa. (2008). Child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church: How situational crime prevention strategies can help create safe environments. *Criminal Justice Behavior* [journal of International Association for Correctional and Forensic Psychology], 35(5):643-657.

Albany Presbytery and apply to situations beyond those involving minors. Strategy components and how Albany could apply derived simple, practical measures illustrate.

- *Increase detection of perpetration.*
 - A more welcoming, inviting, accessible, and user-friendly website post of the Policy would facilitate the risk of detection.
 - A less legalistic Policy contents and format would be more empowering of people considering coming forward.
 - Language describing a lower threshold (e.g., concerns and questions) to cross before Albany responds would increase the likelihood of detection and earlier discovery.
- *Increase accountability of perpetrators / Increase risk for perpetrators.*
 - List in the Policy the means available to Albany's Committee on Ministry and Congregations by which a minister member may be placed under administrative restrictions, as was announced in the stated meeting of September, 2025. The means exist now; Albany's Policy does not communicate them. Communicating the means is a warning about the risks.
- *Increase the effort to commit SMAV / Increase the risk to perpetrators.*
 - Educate people in Albany about survivors' experiences, e.g., Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (CPTSD) or the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) research.⁴⁵ These raise awareness and increase empathic understanding of SMAV's effects and correlations to trauma.
 - Using a bystander intervention model, educate about ways to be vigilant and prepared to act on behalf of another who is being harmed. A knowledgeable and alert community enhances intolerance of SMAV behaviors.
- *Reduce permissibility.*
 - To the Policy, add a provision which requires fidelity to a formal code of conduct specific to SMAV. (The Presbytery of Chicago's policy includes such a provision at the outset.)
 - Add language to the Policy which clearly declares that SMAV in the context of Albany as a faith-based community is a betrayal of bonds of trust and a betrayal of personhood, i.e., this is not a one-dimensional rule violation.
 - Add language to the Policy that all persons have the right to be free from SMAV when participating in the life of the Presbytery.

Note: Prevention measures in many presbyteries are geared to the construct of wellness for people in the ministerial role. There is a place for this as a prevention measure. It fails as a strategy when there is not an accompanying situational prevention framework and measures.

Comment: The point of the above is not the specific measure which Albany can readily "adopt and implement." The point is to illustrate a strategy which represents a change in Albany's

⁴⁵ A classic introduction to CPTSD is the ground-breaking work of Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*. An introduction to the ACE study is in Bessel A. van der Kolk's *The Body Keeps the Score*.

methodology for how it addresses SMAV and the practical outcomes to which a new strategy can lead. Will changing the basic *hows* help change the resultant *whats*? The hope is that new methodology leads to a changed culture which leads to improved practices which meet the standard of *victim-centered* and *trauma-informed* outcomes, thus reinforcing the changed culture.

- (2.) This submission advocates for a new methodology based on a multi-disciplinary approach. In addition to seeking the contributions of the literature beyond the traditional sources of the PC(U.S.A.) and the religious community, Albany has ready access to local and regional resources with experienced and skilled practitioners, and dedicated programs. Consider what is available.
 - Experienced mental health professionals, clinicians, and peer experts who provide services to people who have experienced SMAV, and whose work implements *victim-centered, trauma-informed principles and practices*:
 - Albany County Crime Victim and Sexual Violence Center
 - Child Advocacy Center (there are at least 5 within the bounds of the Presbytery -- in Albany, Glens Falls, Saratoga Springs, Schenectady, Troy)
 - Given what the research literature has documented about poly-victimization, i.e., a person sexually or physically abused as a minor is at greater risk for abuse later in life, potential resources include: Equinox (Albany), Wellspring (Saratoga Springs), YWCA NorthEastern NY (Schenectady), Unity House (Troy)
 - Multi-disciplinary academicians and practitioners are based within the bounds of the Presbytery:
 - Faculty, School of Social Welfare, College of Integrated Health Sciences, University at Albany, SUNY
 - Faculty, Department of Sociology and Criminology, College of Arts and Sciences, University at Albany, SUNY
 - Board-certified psychiatrists and licensed mental health providers, Albany Med Health System / Albany Medical College
- (3.) Consult with professionals who are experienced with problems which arise when faith communities respond poorly and ineffectively to SMAV. What do they see as the problems? What do they see as the best practices to be adopted and implemented? Sources include the Presbytery's insurance carrier and city, county, and state law enforcement officials.
- (4.) Be creative. If Albany believes it has learned valuable lessons worth commending to its peers, and is serious enough about the value to attempt amending the *Book of Order* section on judicial proceedings, then more beneficial, broader-based, advocacy efforts should be considered.
 - Albany could recruit 3-5 other presbyteries which share the geography of New York State. (This siting allows consideration of laws of only one state.)
 - Participating presbyteries would covenant to create 2 consensus documents. The first is a consensus revision of only the discipline section of the *Book of Order*. The revision would be valid for use by those presbyteries for 5 years. As an example, the current high burden for

establishing a finding of guilt, beyond a reasonable doubt, could be replaced by a more realistic standard in SMAV cases – preponderance of evidence.

- The second document is a consensus sexual misconduct policy keyed to the *Book of Order* revision document which would be used by each presbytery for the set, trial-period.
- The validity of the *Book of Order* revision would be approved by the national Church as a pilot program. Existing provisions would be suspended for these presbyteries.
- Annual guided, structured, and systemic reviews of the pilot would be conducted. Data gathering methods would include qualitative interviews. Measures of effectiveness would be identified. Lessons would be recorded. Recommendations and adjustments to the pilot would be compiled bi-annually and submitted to participating presbyteries and the National Church.
- At the end of the 5 years, a final review would be conducted.

Comment: No one presbytery can overcome the entrenched cultural inertia regarding SMAV at the national level. Amending the *Book of Order* is slow and inhibited by obeisance to a “decently and in order” ethos. The scale of decision-making procedures at a General Assembly is a major barrier to large groups making informed decisions. A grassroots pilot by those most involved in the implementation, i.e., a presbytery, is a more reliable crucible for determining the efficacy of what makes for *victim-centered* and *trauma-informed* outcomes.⁴⁶

Conclusion

Imagine using one’s unaided vision to look at Albany Presbytery’s responses in the recently concluded disciplinary case. Its policies and practice are easily visible. The field of vision also sees the presence of the national Church’s *Book of Order*. Now imagine looking at Albany’s response through a telescope. The lenses allow us to see farther and extend our vision to more distant objects. The telescope works to gather light from the distant objects so they can be seen. We now see beyond the immediacy of Albany policies and practices. The presence of the far-reaching influence of the PC(U.S.A.) culture of “decently and order” is seen. If we switch optical aids, and look at Albany’s responses through a microscope, we get the same result. The lens magnifies the tiny objects which are present but not visible to the naked eye so that they may be seen. The microscope allows us to see the presence of the PC(U.S.A.) “decently and in order” culture amidst Albany’s own “decently and in order” culture.

⁴⁶ Too unrealistic? The secular medical and legal worlds in New York State collaborated to establish a controversial, legal pilot in the New York counties of Monroe and Onondaga to test the proposed Medical Orders for Life-Sustaining Treatment (MOLST) program. Proven safe and successful in a test period, it was then expanded statewide. Information on MOLST accessed 10/10/25: https://www.health.ny.gov/professionals/patients/patient_rights/molst/ An unofficial history of the pilot accessed 10/10/25: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Medical_Orders_for_Life-Sustaining_Treatment

The excruciating struggle to get to this point and the Vestry Laight investigation are gifts of vision and insight. They reveal the administrative governance in Albany which shaped its responses to SMAV as an *Unrighteous* and *Disordered* culture. If we can see it accurately, we can begin to describe it accurately. If we can begin to describe it accurately, we can begin to work to improve it.

Appendix

Profaning the Sacred: Meditations on Our Scriptural Illiteracy

This document accompanies two prior submissions to Albany Presbytery, “Unrighteous” and “Disordered.” It contributes to the analysis in “Unrighteous” of the factor of culture. It contributes to “Disordered” as a source for reflection and study.

Not amnesia, but illiteracy The question to ask is not, “When did our scriptural amnesia begin, the point when we lost memory of what sacred texts teach about sexual misconduct, abuse, and violence (SMAV) in our faith communities?” Rather, the essential query regards our scriptural illiteracy. “What have we failed to learn from our scriptures about SMAV?” Time and again, our actions reveal failure to understand the nature and dynamics of SMAV. Our culture reinforces resistance by sanctioning ignorance of vital spiritual truths, a sin of omission. This illiteracy undermines scripture’s foundational role in our polity.

*Scripture is the ground for our governance.*⁴⁷

F-1.0401 Continuity and Change

The presbyterian form of government set forth in the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is grounded in Scripture and built around the marks of the true Church.

*Scripture is the standard and resource for our Christian nurture.*⁴⁸

W-5.0203⁵⁹ Christian Education

God calls the Church to continue the teaching ministry of Jesus Christ, guiding and nurturing one another through all the seasons and transitions of life. In particular, the church offers opportunities for education and formation as members enter the community of faith, discover Christian vocation, and assume responsibility in the world. The church’s primary standard and resource for Christian nurture is the Word of God in Scripture, bearing witness to Christ’s way of truth and life.

Introduction Ignorance disrespects scripture as a source of authority. Ignorance disregards scripture as a source of moral principles, precepts, and tenets. Ignorance disowns scripture as a source for responding

⁴⁷ Interim Unified Agency. (2025). The Foundations of Presbyterian Polity: Chapter 1 – The Mission of the Church, F-1.04 – Openness to the Guidance of the Holy Spirit, F-1.0401 – Continuity and Change. In *Book of Order (2025-2027)*. Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, p. 6. [Accessed 10/14/25: https://www.pcusa.org/sites/default/files/2025-07/2025_0625_Book_of_Order_Interactive_2025-2027.pdf]

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* Directory for Worship: Chapter 5 – Worship and Christian Life, W-5.02 – Worship and the Church’s Ministry within the Community of Faith, W-5.0203, Christian Education, p. 120.

to people's experiences of SMAV. Ignorance discredits scripture's unique capacity to read us and expose our failings. Acting out of illiteracy profanes our sacred texts and concurrently sanctifies acts which in reality profane the personhood of people harmed by SMAV.⁴⁹ The following meditations are offered as a corrective.

The deeply rooted polity legalism is that SMAV is a one-dimensional violation of a rule. A disciplinary offense is defined as a polity rule violated by the one who is offender.⁵⁰ The starting point is that the act of SMAV is rule- and offender-oriented. However, time and again in our scriptures, this reductionistic position is negated and transcended by the prevailing truth that our nature as persons, and thus our faith, is wholistic and relational.

- It is after 40 days of fasting in the wilderness when Jesus declares to the tempter that we do not live by bread alone (Matthew 4:4, Luke 4:4).
- It is in response to a Pharisee's test regarding the hierarchy of the laws that Jesus invokes scripture's directive. To love God is to love with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength (Matthew 22:37, Mark 12:30, Luke 10:27).
- In response to questions about what is good and what is required of us as people of faith, Micah proclaims Yahweh's call. We are to do justice and love kindness and walk humbly with our God (Micah 6:8).

There can be no other conclusion: To follow Jesus of Nazareth is to commit one's whole self through an embodied faith enacted through engagement with persons in spheres both public and private, in contexts both religious and secular.

It follows organically and logically that it is as wholistic persons that we are welcomed into covenants, i.e., relational commitments: "We love because [God] first loved us." (I John 4:19). Relationships of trust, not polity rules, are the foundation of participation in our faith communities. Relationships of trust promote the Reformed tradition principle of shared decisionmaking and our valuing of partnership, interdependence, mutuality, and collaboration. Acts of SMAV in our faith communities are profoundly relational in nature because our faith is profoundly relational. Polity's rule-orientated approach to SMAV

⁴⁹ Scriptures are from the *New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition* unless the text is in Hebrew. [Accessed 10/14/25: <https://www.biblegateway.com/versions/New-Revised-Standard-Version-Updated-Edition-NRSVue-Bible/>] Use of Koine Greek texts is from: Douglas, J. D. (Ed.). (1990). *The New Greek-English Interlinear New Testament (The New Revised Standard Version, New Testament)*. (Brown, Robert K., & Comfort, Philip W., Trans.). Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

⁵⁰ The source for this legalism since the mid-1990s has been the discipline section of the *Book of Order*. No matter the edition, the rule-oriented definition is the baseline.

diminishes the significance of its nature as a relational betrayal, both of the person violated and the community.⁵¹

Confirmation that the nature of SMAV is wholistic and relational is found in decades of pained accounts from those who are survivors and bear witness through stories rife with themes of betrayal, broken trust, injustice, and the yearning for recovery. Our offender-oriented polity for disciplining individuals is spiritually hollow and incapable of addressing the depth and breadth of injustices to survivors.⁵² Rule-oriented polity's trajectory is to a forensic-type determination regarding the person accused, while excluding questions about institutional culpability, corrective and preventive measures, and concerns for meaningful recovery. Too often enshrouded by the imposition of confidentiality, which is notoriously practiced inconsistently, we remain bereft of lessons to be learned and insights to be gained.

A reputed Hasidic tale, without definitive attribution, has been passed along by a wide range of contemporary spiritual teachers. The tale begins with the study of Deuteronomy 6:6 in the Jewish Torah and focuses on a particular verse, a part of the *Shema*, Judaism's central daily prayer: "...And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be upon thy heart..."⁵³

A disciple asks the rebbe: "Why does Torah tell us to 'place these words *upon* your hearts'? Why does it not tell us to place these holy words *in* our heart?" The rebbe answers: "It is because as we are, our hearts are closed, and we cannot place the holy words in our hearts. So we place them *on top* of our hearts. And there they stay until, one day, the heart breaks and the words fall in."

Consider all the people who have come forward to disclose SMAV in our Church community. Consider all the people who have come as survivors to place their words upon us. Perhaps our scriptural illiteracy lies in the reality that our hearts have yet to break open. If the nature of our faith is wholistic, perhaps our illiteracy is that the truth of SMAV has not reached our hearts. May these meditations honor people who are survivors. May our hearts be broken.

⁵¹ The classic works are Marie H. Fortune's *Is Nothing Sacred?: When Sex Invades the Pastoral Relationship* (1989, 1992, 1995) and *Sexual Violence: The Unmentionable Sin* (1983, 1984, 1988, 1990).

⁵² The sequelae of adverse, traumatic consequence for those who are survivors of SMAV has long been documented in the secular clinical research literature. A classic work is Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* (1992, 1997, 2015, 2022). Our scriptural illiteracy is compounded and intensified by our clinical illiteracy, including its evidence-based findings regarding adverse religious and spiritual consequences. Our illiteracy extends to this data with a soul. We continue to give stones of polity when asked for bread (Matthew 7:9).

⁵³ Hebrew texts are based on A *Hebrew-English Bible: According to the Masoretic Text and the JPS 1917 Edition*. Mecon-Mamre. [Accessed 09/15/25: <https://mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt0.htm>]

The Gospel of John 7:16

“You will know them by their fruits.”

Jesus to the disciples.

The hermeneutic from the Sermon on the Mount is pragmatic. Jesus’ standard does not defer to conformity with church polity as the measure of the righteousness of our responses to people who come forward regarding matters of SMAV. The Jesus standard bids us ask how the outcomes of implementing our polity will affect:

- Persons who were harmed, whether directly or indirectly.
- Persons who are at risk of being harmed.
- Persons who committed harm.
- Persons who aided, abetted, or colluded in committing harm, or failed to intervene upon discovery or neglected to act preventively before the harm occurred.
- Persons who are witnesses with either direct knowledge or background information.
- Persons who are involved due to family relationships.
- Persons in an affected faith community.

The Jesus standard bids us consider four types of *Outcomes*:

- *Process Outcomes*: How will we learn what the person(s) coming forward seeks of us as outcomes? How do we respect and honor their intent? Will our responses apply Trauma-Informed Care and Victim-Centered principles and practices? How will we handle tensions between preserving confidentiality, honoring mandated reporting obligations, and making difficult judgment calls? Will our methodology be rigorous, transparent, accountable, rigorous, and fair? How can we assure stakeholders that our *Process Outcomes* are trustworthy, have credibly, and reliably led to just outcomes?
- *Decisional Outcomes*: These are dependent on the type of format which is chosen for responding to the person(s) coming forward. For example, many people who are survivors do not want to participate in a formal church judicial proceeding. The decisions to be reached about a response format will derive from that which best serves the interests and well-being of those harmed, prevents harm to others, and holds those culpable accountable. To those who wield the hammer of the Discipline section of the *Book of Order*, every disclosure of SMAV looks like a disciplinary proceeding nail. However, a person-by-person, incident-by-incident, case-by-case response yields the best fruits. If the outcomes are to include whether the person accused committed harms, will this include whether persons in designated leadership roles failed to intervene upon discovery or neglected to take preventive actions? Will findings include the actions of persons who aided,

abetted, or colluded in the harms? Will a fact-finding inquiry be the best polity means for achieving the sought after *Decisional Outcomes*?

- *Analytical Outcomes*: How will we discover how SMAV events occurred? How will we document the effects on those who were harmed? What do we want to learn from what happened so that we can make changes to prevent SMAV in the future or mitigate harms?
- *Behavioral Outcomes*: Will our responses lead to *calls to action*?⁵⁴ Will a final report be issued? Will there be a public, on-line posting of the report? Will we name those who are culpable? Will counseling support and other forms of recovery be extended to those harmed? How will referrals for accountability be handled? Will there be a structured and guided post-response opportunity to review and critique for the sake of learning and leads to improvements? Will we act to engage our faith community to learn from experience? Will we ensure that an effective means is in place by which those with new information to disclose may feel safe enough to come forward?

Isaiah 28:14-17

“And I will make justice the line and righteousness the plummet...”

Isaiah speaking Yahweh’s word to the civic leaders of Jerusalem.

Because the rulers have forsaken Yahweh as their protector and chosen to shield the people in a refuge in lies and shelter them in falsehood (Isiah 28:15), Yahweh is moved to intervene (Isaiah 28:16). The action is described metaphorically. Yahweh, the builder, lays a new foundation, one tested and sure, for the people’s dwelling place. To ensure that subsequent stones are aligned and true with the foundation stone, the builder uses a line and plummet (plumb line or plumb bob) to measure the structure’s integrity.

Yahweh reveals that the standard by for measuring the people’s dwelling is that of justice (the line) and righteousness (the plummet). Yahweh’s righteousness born of justice will maintain the soundness of the people’s dwelling. The announcement is at once a dramatic attestation of Yahweh’s proclamation of hope and a profound rebuke of the rulers’ faithlessness.

Are we able to grasp and accurately and honestly apply the line of justice and the plummet of righteousness to measure the integrity of our polity in relation to SMAV? Are our skills sufficient to implement Yahweh’s builder’s tool to ensure that the four *Outcomes* identified above (*Process, Decisional, Analytical, Behavioral*) are achieved?

⁵⁴ More than a recommendation, the *call to action* connotes urgency, priority, necessity, and commitment on the part of the addressed individuals by role and institutional entities. See the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada’s final report use of the term: Volume 6, pp. 223ff. [Accessed 12/01/25: https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2015/trc/IR4-9-6-2015-eng.pdf]

Gospel of John 5:1-3a. & 5-8

“Do you want to be made well?”

Jesus to a man who is ill and waiting at the pool by the Sheep Gate of Jerusalem.

To establish a scholarly translation of the fifth chapter of John’s gospel, contemporary biblical translators present the final text with a unique edit. Verse 3 consists of a single sentence. The next words continue at verse 5. There is no verse 4. A footnote is added to display words in early manuscripts which inform the Johannine narrative but do not meet the scholarly standard of a canonical version. Present in the footnote, but not in text, the ancient ending of verse 3 and the whole of verse 4 tell of a popular tradition at the time of Jesus. The “many ill, blind, lame, and paralyzed people” gathered at the pool by the Sheep Gate to the city of Jerusalem to await the occasional descent of an angel of God into the pool who proceeds to disturb the water. The significance was that whoever entered first into the agitated pool would be healed physically.

Imagine the turmoil. An unexpected presence of an angel. A dramatic intervention roiling the water. A desperate surge of people afflicted, struggling and competing for this limited chance of cure. An urgent rush by their supporters to increase their odds. Imagine the cacophony. A burst of relief and joy from the one first as it clashes with the lament from all who were not.

Jesus’ question to one man awaiting the angel is direct: “Do you want to be made well?” According to the tradition, those who came to the pool and waited knew that the angel troubling the waters was an act of God and the requisite to create the opportunity for their healing.⁵⁵ Those who come forward to our faith communities with concerns and relevant information about SMAV are angels who disrupt the still waters of our status quo by their truth-telling. Rather than gratefully welcome the opportunity which they engift to us, we respond with resentment at the inconvenience and annoyance at their timing. Do we want to be made well?

Out of guilt, shame, and fear, our defenses mobilize as denial and minimization. We revert to conflict avoidance or discredit people’s information or motives, or attack them, or assert that we are the real

⁵⁵ This understanding aligns with the African American spiritual, *Wade in the Water*: See Work, Frederick J. (Collector & Harmonizer). (1902, 1904). *New Jubilee Songs, as Sung by the Fisk Jubilee Singers of Fisk Univ.*, 2nd ed. Nashville, TN: Fisk University, p. 8. [Accessed 10/10/25: https://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/data/dlg/aaed/pdfs/dlg_aaed_aar190.001-001-001.pdf] The lyrics echo the story in Exodus of Moses and the Israelites fleeing enslavement in biblical Egypt and the pharaoh’s pursuing army. Survival requires entering the chaos of the Red Sea, now parted by God. *Wade in the Water* extends an invitation, call, and promise that “God’s a-going to the trouble the water,” preparing it for our immersion and our deliverance.

victim. We turn our ignorance and frustration into anger and ire, and direct it at those whom we resent as undermining our priorities. The people afflicted at the Sheep Pool saw the angel as bringing healing. We see the angels who come to us as antagonists. By stigmatizing them, we react contrary to our best self-interests. We deny ourselves an opportunity to heal our faith community. We miss the *kairos* opportunity inherent in what is given to us by those whose witness troubles our waters.⁵⁶

Job 16:2

“I have heard many such things;
Miserable comforters are you all.”

Job to his friends in response to their words of wisdom about his losses.

Job 2:13

“[His friends] sat with [Job] on the ground seven days and seven nights,
and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great.”

Job’s friends sit with him in silence.

Scholars’ commentaries on the story of Job typically trace the rapid progression of the devastating events and losses inflicted upon him in a test of whether he will continue as “a blameless and upright man.” In less than the first two chapters, his 10 children die brutally together, fire destroys his home, attackers raid his land and seize or kill his animals, and loathsome sores erupt on his body. For the Job, the accumulated sufferings are as devastating spiritually as they are physically and emotionally.

Discussions of the role of Job’s comforters, his three friends – Eliphaz the Termanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite – typically center on the contents of their conventional wisdom as they tell Job why he, who asserts his innocence and virtue, is allowed by Elohim to suffer. What they say neither consoles nor explains for him the cause of his punishment. Their explanations that he is guilty of sinning and thus deserving only deepen his despair: “I have heard many such things; miserable comforters are you all.” (16:2). In contemporary usage, “Job’s comforter” is a derogatory idiom designating one who aggravates another’s distress with an ill-advised explanation which is irrelevant or shaming. Too often our faith communities have been unwitting “Job’s comforters” in our messages to people who are survivors of SMAV.

⁵⁶ In the Gospels, the construct of time is more nuanced than that of a linear or chronological marker. The use of χρόνος, transliterated as *chronos*, and in the English translation as “time,” denotes sequential temporality. The use of καιρός, transliterated as *kairos*, and also in the English translation as “time,” however, denotes a moment or event or season of significance, a unique occasion of spiritual opportunity derived from God. Jesus in Galilee announces: “...‘The time [καιρός] is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near / repent and believe the good news.’” When *kairos* presents as a crisis, the question is whether we recognize and act to participate in the opportunity.

Focusing on the contents of the three friends' dialogues with Job, however, diverts us from recognizing how they initially engaged with him. When they learn of his condition, they band together and go to him to offer direct consolation and comfort. Job is in such a distressed state that initially they do not recognize him. Once they do, their first act is to join him as he sits on the ground. None of them speak "for they saw that his suffering was very great." (2:13). They maintain the pained silence for seven days and seven nights, a void of words broken only when Job chooses (3:1).

These oft-disparaged three comforters model a profoundly respectful and person-centered first response to one who has experienced traumas and whose suffering is beyond words to convey. Job is not required to interact until he is safe and ready. It's a step toward restoring his agency amidst so much powerlessness. He is not required to participate in a protocol, comply with a procedure, or conform to a policy. Before doing anything else, his friends see and recognize that he suffers. Before saying a word, the three listen to hear what Job will say, to hear what he needs to say.

Job's friends fail miserably to understand the basis of his trauma. While he rejects their judgment, he does not leave them. There is enough rapport for him to confront them. And there is enough safety for him to engage in a dialogue with each for over 30 chapters. We can learn from them what not to do. And we can learn from them what did serve Job's needs.

The Gospel of Luke 10:33-34

"But a Samaritan while traveling came upon him, and when he saw him he was moved with compassion. He went to him and bandaged his wounds..."

The first act of the Samaritan is compassion. The next act is treating the wounds.

Of the dozens of parables told by Jesus, the story of the Good Samaritan in Luke's account (10:29-37) is likely among those most those we most frequently teach to children. We cherish the simple narrative's enduring truth which reveals that those who are our neighbors, whom Yahweh calls us to love (Leviticus 19:18), are a demographic category without limits. Anyone and everyone, and strangers, are included. Jesus' invocation of Leviticus makes absolutely clear that loving the neighbor is part of God's covenant, a relational bond, with us.

We also commend the narrative's valuing the Samaritan for choosing to act on behalf of the injured traveler, in contrast to those with high religious standing who chose to pass by. It is the Samaritan, a Gentile, whose behavior most conforms to the obligation of Leviticus 19:16: "...neither shalt thou stand idly by the blood of thy neighbour..."

However, the actions of the Samaritan contain two other significant lessons of particular relevance for us as we relate to neighbors who have experienced SMAV. The first begins with the Samaritan's discovery of the man left for dead on the Jericho Road. In the original Koine Greek text, the word used by Jesus to identify the Samaritan's initial response is ἐσπλαγγνίσθη, transliterated as *esplanchnisthē*, and in the English translation as "moved with pity." The same word is used by Jesus at Luke 15:20 in the parable of the Prodigal Son to identify the father's response when he first sights his son in the distance on the way home. In this verse, the word's nuanced meaning is translated as "moved with compassion."

Luke's gospel uses ἐσπλαγγνίσθη only one other time (7:13), the story of Jesus' encounter in Nain with the widowed mother and the funeral procession for her only son. The meaning is expressed as "moved with compassion" to describe Jesus' reaction to her. Luke's select usage of the word calls attention to the depth of these responders' emotional response upon encountering people in pain and suffering. Jesus' affect is deep and personal, enough to warrant Luke's documenting it in the gospel.⁵⁷ Recognizing personhood is our antecedent, relational step of extending hospitality toward one who is a stranger or beyond our particular community.

We give the parable of the Samaritan short shrift when we ignore his initial response before his physical interventions begin. What keeps our faith communities from first responding with ἐσπλαγγνίσθη when people come forward with concerns about SMAV? Is our resistance so strong that to avoid their distress we can only reference the *Book of Order* and our policies and procedures? Our polity protocols do not acknowledge the reality of the survivor's pain, establish a relationship, elicit trust, or honor a person-centered commitment.

⁵⁷ A rabbi once asked the pupils how they could tell when the night has ended and the day has begun.

"Could it be," asked one of the students, "when you can see an animal in the distance and tell whether it's a sheep or a dog?" "No," answered the rabbi.

Another asked, "Is it when you can look at a tree in the distance and tell whether it's a fig tree or a peach tree?" "No," answered the rabbi.

"Then when is it?" the pupils demanded. "It is when you can look on the face of any man or woman, and see that it is your brother or sister. Because if you cannot see this, it is still night."

From a sermon by Rabbi Joshua L. Caruso in a Rosh Hashanah service, "Compassion: The world is Wide Enough," Anshe Chesed Fairmount Temple, Beachwood, OH. The story's source is unknown. While Martin Buber's classic collection, *Tales of the Hasidim*, is frequently cited, the story is not in Buber's book. Uncredited, it is included in a posthumous collection of German theologian Dorothee Söelle's writings: (1984). "Love Your Neighbor as Yourself." Chapter 3 in *The Strength of the Weak: Toward a Christian Feminist Identity*, Robert & Rita Kimber, Translators. Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, pg. 41.

The next lesson for us as responders is in the text at 10:34. We do ourselves disservice if we are satisfied by the English translation: “[The Samaritan] went to him and bandaged his wounds...” To be discovered in the Koine Greek is the original word, τραύματα, transliterated as *traumata*, and in the English translation as “wounds.” The Samaritan treats trauma, which Jesus describes as plural. This is the only occurrence of *traumata* in the entirety of the New Testament.

Tracing how the *traumata* are addressed is instructive. First, the man’s presenting physical injuries receive immediate, on-scene intervention. The next act is one of risk reduction. The Samaritan transports the man out of exposure to further harm, delivering him an inn, a safer site with resources. The Samaritan stays to provide a continuity of care, facilitating the man’s transition toward recovery. Only the Samaritan is able to pass along the man’s recent history and anticipate what is needed (10:34). Next, the Samaritan arranges third-party coverage with the innkeeper to ensure the level of care is sustained (10:35). Finally, the Samaritan commits to following-up in the future, another intervention to promote recovery (10:35).

We can fully anticipate that over time the man’s other traumas will need to be addressed. The brutal physical assault may render him vulnerable and afraid of strangers. Being abandoned by some may destroy a basic confidence and limit future travel. The injustice of the attack may fuel a harsh, generalized anger. The list is long. Think of the many domains possibly affected by SMAV in adverse ways: economic, emotional, physical, psychological, relational, religious, spiritual, and vocational. While there may be typical trauma effects, each person who survives is unique. While there may be typical resilience factors which can be mobilized for the sake of recovery, each person who survives is unique.

How ironic that we as a faith community attempt sporadically to learn and apply evidence-based research on the widely-adopted clinical efficacy of Trauma-Informed Care principles and practice while oblivious to the latent moral power of this parable to guide our responses.

There is yet another lesson in this parable, one which goes beyond responding in the moment to the presenting problem. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. preached this Lukan text to affirm the Samaritan’s acts as manifestations of Christian social responsibility, and then continued to call Christians to fulfill “another aspect of Christian social responsibility which is just as compelling. It seeks to tear down the unjust conditions and build anew instead of patching things up. It seeks to clear the Jerico [sic] road of its robbers as well as caring for the victims of robbery.”⁵⁸ There is a systemic dimension to be

⁵⁸ King, Martin Luther, Jr. (1955, November 20 ?). “The One-Sided Approach of the Good Samaritan.” A handwritten sermon outline. [Accessed 09/28/25 at the King Papers section of The Martin Luther

faced in responding to the traumas inflicted by SMAV in our communities. Our caring for one neighbor harmed on the road does not make the road safer for other neighbors.

The Gospel of Matthew 15:21-28

“Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting...”

The mother who extends Jesus’ self-identity.

The emotional drama of this scene in Matthew’s narrative is undergirded by the sparks and flashes of vivid emotion at the beginning of Chapter 15 which occurred earlier in Jerusalem. There, the Pharisees and scribes confronted Jesus regarding the disciples’ failure to adhere to a specific practice regarding ritual defilement (15:1-2). Jesus responded by confronting them with the hypocrisy of their distortions of the tradition (15:3-9). When the disciples inform Jesus that the Pharisees had taken offense (15:12), Jesus replies with a parable (15:13-14), the meaning of which is beyond Peter’s grasp (15:15). Exasperated at Peter’s lack of comprehension (15:16-17), Jesus more concretely identifies a person’s wholistic, spiritual commitment as the true signifier of what constitutes adherence. He continues his critique of the one-dimensional, legalistic definition of faithfulness as complicity. As if silently acknowledging the drain of these tense encounters, at 15:21 the location shifts significantly without comment.

Jesus and the disciples withdraw from the sharp conflicts in Jerusalem, going north to the district of Tyre and Sidon, two Mediterranean Sea port cities in distinctly Gentile territory (15:21), referred to here as Canaan. The scene begins with the sudden presence of an unnamed woman from the region who presents herself by shouting. She beseeches Jesus on behalf of her tormented daughter while recognizing him as the Messiah (15:22). The discomfort is heightened by its unexpectedness. Her disruption is unanticipated; the urgency of her need is unforeseen; her boldness is startling; as a Gentile, her declaration of faith is surprising. No one is prepared for what they perceive as an unwarranted and challenging encounter. Jesus is silent (15:23).

Annoyed by her repeated efforts, the disciples urge him to “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.” (15:23). Jesus answers in words rooted in religious demographics applicable to her and him, words which function as rejection: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” (15:24). Nevertheless, she persists. In a gesture of earnestness and humility, she kneels before him, in her devalued status as a woman and a Gentile. She succinctly reiterates her faith in him and her personal need in three words: “Lord, help me.” (15:25). Jesus dismisses her again, using a metaphor to convey his demographic justification: “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” (15:26). Nevertheless, she persists: “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their

King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University, Standford, CA:

<https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/one-sided-approach-good-samaritan>]

masters' table.” (15:27). She accepts the accuracy of his metaphor about her lesser status as a Gentile and applies its symbolism to reaffirm her faith in who he is. Based on her belief in him as sent by God, she extends his metaphor about identify and purpose to justify his responding to the plea on behalf of her daughter. It is a revelatory, teachable moment for his benefit.

That Jesus acknowledges the accuracy of her truth about his identity and the validity of her inclusion in his ministry is immediate: ““Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.’ And her daughter was healed from that moment.” (15:28). The effect of this unidentified person’s gift to Jesus, the fullness of his identity, is confirmed in the remainder of chapter 15. His withdrawal from people is reversed in a series of large, public gatherings. Amidst crowds, he cures people with physical injuries and limitations (15:29-31). Amidst 4,000 people, he multiplies seven loaves of bread and a few fish to feed them all. (15:32-38).

How is it that when people who do not fit our faith communities’ categories of inclusion but come to us with their urgent needs related to experiences of SMAV, we do not recognize the validity of their expectation -- that we will act according to who we say we are as followers of Jesus Christ. By our actions and inactions, which dismiss their stories and needs, and reject them as unwelcome, we miss the opportunity they give us to fulfill our identity. Those who persist after being denied, and persist yet again and again, are regarded as irritants. Citing provisions in our polity, we sound like the disciples in verse 23: ““Send her away...” It is our intractability which drives the cycle of repeat attempts which ask that we be who we say we are. Turning our backs to the Canaanite woman before us deprives us from receiving her gift.

The Gospel of Luke 19:40

“...‘I tell you, if [the multitude of people are] silent, the stones would shout out.’”

Jesus to the Pharisees as enters into Jerusalem.

The fantastical images of the natural world animated is familiar in Hebrew Scriptures. Trees of the forest sing in joy at God’s coming (Psalm 96:12-13). Waters clap their hands and hills sing for joy at God’s presence (Psalm 98:8-9). Heavens, mountains, forest, and trees break into song at God’s redeeming acts (Isaiah 44:23). Mountains and hills burst into song as part of God’s covenant (Isaiah 55:3, 12). Each celebratory depiction is rooted in God’s redeeming and righteous actions and being.

However, the power of the symbolism emerges in a new way in the exchange between the Pharisees and Jesus on the day we name as Palm Sunday. A multitude of disciples gathers to greet Jesus who is descending from the Mount of Olives to enter Jerusalem (19:37). From the crowd, the Pharisees direct Jesus to order his followers to cease their praise of God, their rejoicing at his coming, and their heralding him as “...‘the king who comes in the name of the Lord!’...” Jesus’ metaphorical reply is simple. God’s

truth will not be silenced, hidden, denied, or suppressed. Failure to recognize, receive, and declare the truth will not stand. Silence will be broken and reversed by the mundane rocks at our feet. Their shouts of proclamation will simultaneously protest, rebut, and challenge the disciples' silence. There are public consequences to denial and secrecy.

When the truth of SMAV in our community is presented to us, what factors culminate in our silence? Which are the stones around us that then begin to shout? What factors enable us to recognize, receive, and affirm the truth? What gives us back our voice?

Genesis 6:14

“Make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in the ark,
and cover it inside and out with pitch.”

Elohim to Noah prior to the coming flood.

Scripture invites us to ask a question about prevention and preparation. The answer is obvious. “When did Noah build the ark...? Before the rain. Before the rain.”⁵⁹ After decades of floods of SMAV have cast us adrift, why are we still so unmoored from the shelter of safeguarding strategies? Why are we not better anchored in evidence-based, research-tested practices? Why do we not commit ourselves to preventing SMAV?

- Is it the false assertion that we are not vulnerable, that we are not at risk, that SMAV is not part of who we are?
- Is it our fearful discomfort with the intersectionality of the realities of sexuality, acts of SMAV, perceived tensions between forgiveness and justice, loss of community standing, inability to hold each other accountable, and interpersonal conflict?
- Is it the ill-informed presumption that we are prepared, and thus immune and no longer at-risk? If so, have we distorted Jesus' directive to the disciples to be “wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (Matthew 10:16) by eliminating the first phrase regarding prudence, and elevating the last phrase which leaves us woefully naïve?
- Is it the unwritten, tacit plan of helplessness that if a case is discovered, we will turn to other authorities, like a lawyer or a national Church official, to direct our actions?
- Is it that we minimize the problem of SMAV by not understanding that its consequences are serious, and poignantly more so in the context of spiritually-rooted covenants?

⁵⁹ Spoken by the character of Nathan Muir, a Central Intelligence Agency case officer played by Robert Redford, in the fictional movie, *Spy Game*. (2001).

- Is it that we assess our community’s risk of occurrence as only a remote statistical *probability* to justify not facing the continuing statistical *possibility* that SMAV can occur? If so, why do we so strongly embrace the documented, very low statistical *possibility* that a disclosure of SMAV is a malicious and wrongful accusation, and ignore the documented, very high statistical *probability* that disclosures of SMAV in faith community are true?
- Is it that acts of SMAV in our communities have statistically been committed primarily against women, youth, and children, and been committed primarily by males, and therefore those historically devalued in our communities are not our priorities?

The Gospel of Matthew 21:12-13

“He said to them, ‘It is written, “My house shall be called a house of prayer,”
‘but you are making [the Jerusalem temple] a den of robbers.’”
Jesus to the money changers and those who sold animals.

The convenience of an on-site currency exchange facilitated the payment of a tax owed by those who came to the Jerusalem temple to worship. Similarly, the availability of animals for mandated sacrificial offerings was accepted practice. What was unacceptable for Jesus was the profiteering by the operators whose fees for exchanging money was exorbitant and whose prices for animals were excessive. The sordid exploitation of temple religious requirements prompted what we popularly describe as Jesus’ cleansing of the temple (21:12).

The episode invites us to consider the systemic context of this misuse of power and position. To what degree was the religious hierarchy, as administrators of the temple, aware of the operators’ abuses? To what degree were the administrators negligent by failing to exercise supervision of the operators? Was the ongoing financial corruption at the operators’ tables passively tolerated? If so, why? Was there active, pecuniary collusion between the hierarchy and the operators? What could have been done to exercise accountability? Can we recognize the contributing factor of institutional betrayal when we analyze our incidents of SMAV?

Does this set of scriptures exhaust what is available for our learning? No. Unequivocally.

“The danger is not lest the soul should doubt whether there is any bread, but lest, by a lie, it should persuade itself that it is not hungry.” Simone Weil. (1951). *Waiting for God*. (Craufurd, Emma. Trans.) New York, NY: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, p. 210.