



A Disciple-Making Church

Vienna Presbyterian Church PC(USA)

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Dear VPC Congregation:

March 24, 2011

This letter updates the VPC community about the continuing effects of the abuse perpetrated by Eric De Vries, former VPC Student Ministries Director. We are saddened to tell you that pain continues, but pleased to report a new phase of relationship with several survivors of his abuse following testimony by one courageous young woman and subsequent interactions with other witnesses and their families. We wish to share with you a recent letter from the mother of one survivor, attached.

We want this letter to focus on the survivors and our future with them and not the abuse, so the letter does not begin with a full recounting of history. For recipients of this letter who were not attending VPC in 2005, or for others wishing a review of the history of this situation, please refer to the appendix following the body of this letter.

During the November 22, 2010 Session meeting, Elders and Pastors heard detailed testimony from a courageous young woman who was abused by Eric De Vries, hearing both details of years of emotional, spiritual, and sexual abuse and her disappointment about how she perceived her treatment by VPC since the abuse was discovered, including her confusion and disillusionment when letters of support for De Vries written by VPC members and staff were cited by the judge as factors in the sentence De Vries received. She told her story again to our Board of Deacons in January of this year. She showed wisdom and composure. She was not looking to indict, but to inform. Her courage and commitment opened the door to new opportunities, and we honored her then and again now.

We greatly respect the strength and character possessed by this young woman and others who have confidentially come forward both for the very acts of doing so and for working with Session members to begin a healing process. We are grateful for the opportunity to regain their trust and confidence and, in particular, for the opportunity we have been given to assist them with their recovery process, including support for counseling and other recovery and reconciliation focused activities.

The fact that these events happened in our church is a matter of extreme sadness and regret. Members of Staff and of Session are profoundly sorry that VPC's response after the abuse was discovered was not always helpful to those entrusted to our care.

Session humbly and sincerely apologizes for what occurred.

Session is united in commitment:

- 1) to support the survivors injured in our church through ongoing ministry to the abuse survivors and their families, including financial support for needed therapeutic services**
- 2) to carefully study events related to the abuse and its aftermath in order to enter reconciliation with abuse victims and to do the best we can do to prevent similar episodes in the future**

We believe that we have an obligation to learn as much as we can about those who may have suffered as a consequence of De Vries' actions and then do whatever we can do to assist them. We remain hopeful that others who may be in need of assistance will also come forward and provide us with the same opportunity to help.

As a consequence of what we have learned to date, Session has taken a number of steps. In addition to reaching out to those who have come forward and offering our support and professional assistance, we have retained independent counsel to engage in a detailed and thorough study of what occurred. We are committed to learning the truth and to keeping our congregation informed about what we learn. After the abuse was discovered in 2005, steps were taken to increase staff awareness of sexual abuse. We also implemented changes in policies and procedures at our church, all intended to enhance safety. In 2009, NewSpring Ministry: Hope for the Sexually Abused, was started to provide care for survivors and their families, to lead our church in future prevention efforts, and to provide community education about sexual abuse. Pastors, all Staff, Deacons and Elders are participating in customized training on sexual abuse, and the NewSpring Ministry has recommended a specialized curriculum for our entire church dealing with child and youth safety. In addition, there will be mandatory sexual abuse training for all who work with children and youth, to include volunteers.

This is not at all the end of this story but rather just a step in an ongoing process. Session is now engaged in additional consideration of how to prevent similar future events, including learning from experts as well as studying the events that occurred. This process is being carried out with collaboration of staff, those who have confided in us, their professional counselor, other sexual abuse experts, and legal counsel.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

A) We are calling the congregation to action. We urge you to *pray* for any and all of those who may have been affected by Eric De Vries, including many young people who were at the fringes of the abuse and drifted away from their faith as a result of these situations. We have an obligation to learn more about this group of young adults, males as well as females, and what we may be able to do to assist them. We ask you to *support* our NewSpring Ministry, a program that is directly involved in serving the survivors and leading our effort to prevent future problems. We also ask that you willingly *participate* in sexual abuse awareness and prevention training when your turn comes. Our church will be safest if all members have the knowledge and commitment required for ongoing vigilance.

B) We ask you to please respect the survivors here and love them as Christ loves us, feeling their pain and sharing their burden. Our first priority is caring directly for those who were injured. Of critical importance to that objective is that you set aside any perception or belief that the abuse they suffered was somehow their fault. **The abused did nothing to cause the abuse, and it was not their fault in any way. Any comments to the contrary would be both incorrect and harmful.**

Only one young woman has shared her story in person in a group setting within VPC. It is an intensely emotional experience for this survivor to share her story, and likewise for others to hear it. If continued sharing remains beneficial both to the survivor and those listening, her story may continue to be shared in relatively small and specific groups within our church. By the grace of God, we also have new relationship opportunities with other survivors, including their participation in the collaborative study of what happened in the past and our shared hope that God can rebuild lives through truth-telling, repentance, restoration and reconciliation.

C) We ask you to come forward. If you possess, or think you possess, information pertaining to this

situation, please share it personally with the designated members of our NewSpring Leadership Team listed in the Appendix below, by means of the NewSpring Hotline, or through the NewSpring website. If you have young adult children who were part of VPC during the time Eric De Vries was working with youth, please share this letter with them, and ask them directly if they have any information about any inappropriate conduct that they may have observed during this time. Especially ask them if they know or suspect any specific person or persons to have been victimized by Eric De Vries.

If you suspect that your family was somehow involved or affected, we want to hear from you, we want to help you and, and we want to be in a healing process with you. Please come forward. It is our sincere desire, as well as our moral and spiritual obligation, to assist you in whatever way we can.

Finally, we also want you to know that in the coming days, The Washington Post is expected to publish an article, based on its own investigation of this matter. We have been fully cooperative with the Post reporter in connection with his investigation. Still, we have limited knowledge about what he has learned and with whom he has spoken. Suffice it to say, we may learn more unfortunate news both from this article and as this matter further unfolds.

As we continue to learn more, please be assured of our commitment to take steps to assist those who have been injured and to make sure that we do all we can do to avoid anything like this ever happening again in our church.

Adverse circumstances present an opportunity for personal renewal and growth and to apply our timeless faith to new, emerging realities. We ask that you help us in this effort with your prayers and support so that we may recover and restore wholeness to those who were injured and to our congregation. Our faithful God helps us heal even such deep wounds. We know what we must do to get started. We must learn the truth. We must speak the truth. ***We must “walk in the light” if we are to “live by truth”.***

God bless our Church as we move forward in ministry together.

In Christ,

ALL MEMBERS OF VPC SESSION

Please plan to attend the Prayer Service and one of the Congregational Response gatherings. At these gatherings, the congregation will have the chance to share their thoughts and feelings on these events, and to speak from their hearts in support of the survivors of the abuse that occurred here.

Prayer Service

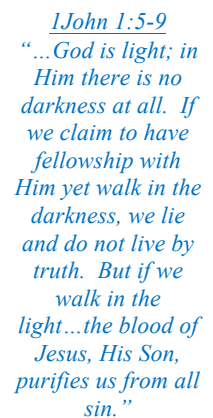
Wednesday, March 30, 6:30pm, Sanctuary

Congregational Response

Wednesday, March 30, 7:30pm, Sanctuary

Second Congregational Response

Sunday, April 3, 12:15pm, Sanctuary



1John 1:5-9
“...God is light; in Him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with Him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by truth. But if we walk in the light...the blood of Jesus, His Son, purifies us from all sin.”

APPENDIX

BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

In September 2005, church leaders learned that De Vries had, as it was understood then, “crossed the boundary of emotional and physical propriety in his relationship with female students” (letter of September 28, 2005 to the VPC community). De Vries’ employment at VPC was ended by his forced resignation and the matter was reported to police and Fairfax County Child Protective Services. A letter from Pete James was mailed to VPC families and friends to report this devastating news and to invite middle and high school youth and their parents to an open meeting to discuss VPC’s plans for changes in our student ministries. In early 2006, De Vries, who had relocated out of the DC area, was found guilty of the misdemeanor crime “contributing to the delinquency of a minor” as a result of a plea bargain which reduced the original felony charge of “taking indecent liberties with a minor.” His conviction was not specifically sexual in nature and did not land him on mandatory “sexual offender” lists. He was given a one-year suspended jail sentence with counseling required.

VPC became aware in 2007 that a victim needed financial assistance for necessary counseling. At that time funding was provided through the Deacons fund. VPC’s commitment to ongoing financial assistance for necessary therapeutic services was formalized by Session resolution in April 2009 and placed with related activities within a new ministry called NewSpring: Hope for the Sexually Abused.

INFORMATION ABOUT OUR NEWSRING MINISTRY:

www.viennapres.org/newspring

CONTACTS FOR VPC CONGREGATION TO REPORT ABUSE OR ASK QUESTIONS:

Pastor David Jordan-Haas	david.jordan-haas@viennapres.org
Elder William H. Carter, Jr.	william.carter@viennapres.org
Elder Anne Teresa	anne.teresa@viennapres.org
Deacon Jeanie Thomas	jeanie.thomas@viennapres.org

OR NewSpring Hotline: 703-937-1889

OR newspring@viennapres.org

OR On-Line Reporting Forms available at www.viennapres.org/talk