

March 30, 2011

Dear Churches of National Capital Presbytery,



NATIONAL CAPITAL
PRESBYTERY
Missional · Pastoral · Prophetic

As you may have read, the Washington Post recently reported on the abusive conduct of a youth ministry director employed by the Vienna Presbyterian Church (VPC) from 2001 until 2005. In September 2005, church leaders learned that the youth director had, as it was understood then, “crossed the boundary of emotional and physical propriety in his relationship with female students.” His 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 Rev. 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. In early 2006, the youth director 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.” He was given a one-year suspended jail sentence with counseling required.

Since that time, several young women have come forward to describe years of sexual, emotional and spiritual abuse by this individual. Please keep all parties, and especially the survivors, the congregation at VPC and the pastors and staff at VPC in your prayers. This event is traumatic to all involved and we grieve with them this violation of the sacred trust which is fundamental to spiritual formation.

This event is not what defines the Vienna Church. No one there finds this violation in anyway acceptable or excusable. This congregation’s ministry is remarkable. This congregation has served as an engine for new church development in this Presbytery. They had a team on the ground in response to the Katrina/Rita hurricanes every week for months following that tragedy. They have sponsored an ongoing medical ministry in Haiti for years now. More than 500 people participated in the “Labor 4 Your Neighbor” projects on Labor Day Sunday. Over 170 students and adults served on Summer Mission Projects in New York, Pittsburgh, New Orleans and Haiti last year. Vienna’s youth ministry took a hit in the wake of this sexual abuse, yet last year they confirmed 47 teenagers. Their membership grew by 150 members last year, a net increase of 50 people. Their “English as a Second Language” ministry served 465 people last year. Their giving increased 8% last year. They provide a dynamic spiritual presence serving their vision of “Call, Equip, Send” with careful intentionality and focus upon keeping the main thing the main thing.

Nevertheless, according to the survivors of this abuse who have spoken with VPC Session and have been interviewed by the Washington Post, this violation of sacred trust occurred as well. After the abuse was discovered in 2005, steps were taken by Vienna to increase staff awareness of sexual abuse. They implemented changes in policies and procedures and new sexual abuse training programs, 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 Vienna in future prevention efforts, and to provide community education about sexual abuse.

In that the allegations conform to the pattern of behavior often exhibited by a sexual predator, it is unlikely that training in sexual misconduct prevention would have had much of an impact on the alleged perpetrator. Training does, however, increase the general awareness of these issues giving a congregation better capacity to recognize sexual abuse and intervene accordingly.

The National Capital Presbytery Sexual Misconduct Response Coordinating Team (RCT) strongly urges every Session to require all persons working with children and youth to attend one of the day-long boundary training sessions.

Those dates are as follows:

April 27, 2011
June 23, 2011
August 10, 2011
October 14, 2011
December 5, 2011
February 14, 2012
April 13, 2012
June 7, 2012
August 27, 2012
October 17, 2012
December 4, 2012

Contact rct@thepresbytery.org for more information or to sign up to attend.

Please know that the Presbytery's Response Coordinating Team is available to advise you in any case involving a sexual misconduct allegation, not simply those involving pastors.

At the March 16, 2001 meeting, the RCT took action recommending that if any allegations come forward to elders or pastors in a congregation, that (1) a member of the church file disciplinary charges with the Session against such a person, be they volunteer or paid staff, and (2) that the Session then refer the case to the Presbytery for adjudication and submit to the process carefully constructed and executed by the RCT by which putative victims, alleged perpetrators, affected bystanders and the congregation itself can receive care, know the truth and restrain sin as appropriate. It is a rare Session that has the capacity to adjudicate such a case, both emotionally (as parties close to the situation) or legally (following the procedures in the Rules of Discipline), thus the RCT advises that ordinarily the Session refer the case to the Presbytery which has that capacity. Additionally, we remind you again to immediately call Child Protective Services in the event an incident involves a minor or mentally challenged person unable to give consent.

We hope that you never have need to call us in our capacity as the Sexual Misconduct Response Coordinating Team, however if you do, know we are here to work with you through whatever situation you may find yourselves.

Response Coordinating Team
National Capital Presbytery

Rev. Leslieanne Braunstein, co-chair
Rev. Scott Winnette, co-chair
Elder Susan Wright
Rev. Stephany Crosby
Rev. Donna Weddle