

Nebraska bishops: Inquiry about sex abuse will provide truth, accountability

The Nebraska attorney general has asked the state's three Roman Catholic dioceses for information on sexual abuse and other misconduct, and all three dioceses have said they will cooperate with the request.

"We welcome accountability in our community," Archbishop George Lucas of Omaha said Sept. 5. "The truth is good for everyone. I see this as a real moment of grace."

Nebraska Attorney General Doug Peterson is seeking documents from the last 40 years for any information on claims of sexual exploitation, including incidents of child pornography or "sexual communication with another person" by anyone with authority in the Church.

Peterson's letter reports that after his Aug. 16 formal request asking victims of sex abuse to come forward, his office received "a number of reports which have warranted further investigation," the Omaha World-Herald reports.

"We have worked collaboratively with our law enforcement officials," said Lucas. "We also welcome any suggested improvements that would be helpful in making our safe environment program more effective."

"We remain committed in the Archdiocese of Omaha to the protection of young people and vulnerable adults, to the prevention of abuse, to healing for past victims of abuse and to cooperate with civil authorities in these matters," the archbishop continued.

The inquiry in Nebraska follows new or revisited allegations of sexual abuse of minors or other misconduct committed by priests in the Diocese of Lincoln as far back as the 1980s. Several priests have resigned as pastors, while alleged misconduct of a former vocations director for the diocese, who died in 2008, also became a matter of public attention.

Sex abuse in the Church has returned to national attention. In mid-August the Pennsylvania attorney general released a grand jury report following an 18-month investigation into the files of six Pennsylvania Catholic dioceses. The report included allegations against 300 priests of abusing over 1,000 victims over a 70-year period.

In response to the Nebraska attorney general's inquiry, the state's other bishops have said they too will cooperate.

"Law enforcement agencies are the best, most objective independent investigators," Bishop James Conley of Lincoln said Aug. 29. "The Diocese of Lincoln appreciates the work that they do and pledges its support to all efforts to stop criminal behavior by predators."

Bishop Joseph Hanefeldt of Grand Island said his diocese intends to provide "complete cooperation and full compliance with this investigation."

“While there are no open cases being investigated in the diocese at this time, if issues are identified, he will address them prudentially, so that victims may find healing and hope,” Hanefeldt said in a statement provided to CNA.

Don Kleine, the Douglas County attorney, will handle possible investigations in the Omaha archdiocese. He told the Omaha World-Herald he has three attorneys specially trained in prosecuting sexual assault crimes on children. Such crimes are common, with perpetrators often being trusted adults including victims’ relatives, coaches, and teachers. The abuse victims sometimes come forward when they are adults and are often deeply affected by the abuse.

Klein said victims should “report immediately to law enforcement.” He said his office has a good relationship with Archbishop Lucas and has worked closely with Catholic officials in Omaha on reporting protocols.

Pat Condon, the Lancaster County Attorney, said his office would review Church records in search of “prosecutable crimes” and pursue any investigation to try those crimes in court. If his Lincoln-based office does not find evidence of crimes, he told the Omaha World-Herald, “we would return those to the diocese and then they can take whatever actions they want with it.”

The Lincoln diocese said it received the letter from the attorney general seeking its documents and is cooperating with the state-wide investigation.

“The diocese will continue to cooperate with law enforcement as they work to assure that children and young people are safe,” the Lincoln diocese said. It encouraged all sex abuse victims to report abuse to the attorney general or local law enforcement. The diocese noted that it has dedicated resources available to assist victims, and an anonymous hotline and website to help people report misconduct in the Lincoln diocese.

Similarly, the Omaha archdiocese said anyone concerned about the actions of a member of the clergy or any church worker should contact law enforcement or the archdiocese’s manager of victim outreach and prevention.

The archdiocese said its child protection office dates back to 2003, established after the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops approved the Charter for the Protection of Young People the previous year. It annually passes an audit from an independent auditing firm retained by the U.S. bishops’ conference to ensure compliance with the charter.

According to the archdiocese, its parishes and schools reported giving training in abuse prevention and personal safety to over 30,000 children. Over 14,000 clergy, employees, and volunteers of the archdiocese who work with children and parents have undergone background checks and have received safe environment training.

A Grand Island diocese spokesperson told CNA that Hanefeldt had received the attorney general’s letter late Sept. 4. The bishop has been in contact with him regarding the scope of the investigation and chancery staff are actively working to fulfill the request.

All three dioceses are now audited for compliance with the U.S. bishops' child protection charter.

According to the Omaha archdiocese, the audit evaluates a diocese for various efforts, including effective reporting and response to sex abuse allegations; promotion of healing and reconciliation with clergy abuse survivors; proper screening and background evaluations for archdiocesan and religious clergy, educators, volunteers, and other personnel; and safe environment training for those who work with children.

After the U.S. bishops adopted the child protection charter, the Diocese of Lincoln initially took part in the audit only for the year 2003, after which then-Bishop Fabian Bruskewitz declined to participate again. It has long been one of the few dioceses not to comply.

Bishop Conley, who has headed the Lincoln diocese since 2012, in 2015 announced the diocese would again comply with the audit. The auditing process had improved and had become more beneficial to the diocese since its initial years, he said.

Attorneys general in other states, including New York, New Jersey, and New Mexico, have said they will seek Catholic Church records on sex abuse.