

Lawsuit accuses ACNA congregation of negligence that led to child sexual abuse
by [Kathryn Post](#) in the [June 15, 2022](#) issue

When Cherin Marie joined Christ Our Light Anglican Church in 2013, she couldn't imagine filing a lawsuit against the close-knit Anglican Church in North America church plant in Big Rock, Illinois, which many of her relatives attended. But three years after her then nine-year-old daughter first said she was sexually abused by Mark Rivera, a lay minister at the church, Cherin feels she has no other option.

Cherin, who declined to use her last name to protect her daughter's privacy, filed a lawsuit on May 18 against the church, arguing that her daughter has experienced mental anguish and emotional and physical pain because of the church's negligence. The lawsuit requests over \$50,000 in damages. The case cocounsel will be longtime sexual abuse attorney Boz Tchividjian and local counsel Evan Smola.

"My biggest hope is that by raising public awareness through this suit, any survivors that haven't been reached might be made aware of safe avenues to reach out to and get help," Cherin said in an interview. She hopes the lawsuit will hold the church accountable.

ACNA's Upper Midwest Diocese, where Christ Our Light was located before its dissolution in July 2021, has been publicly grappling with accusations of mishandling abuse allegations since last summer. The diocese is undergoing two parallel outside investigations: one into the accusations against Rivera and the diocese's response and another into allegations of abuse of church power.

Rivera has been charged with felony sexual assault and predatory abuse of a victim under 13 years of age in connection with his alleged crimes against Cherin's daughter, and in December he was charged with two felony counts of criminal sexual assault in connection with multiple alleged rapes of his former neighbor, Joanna Rudenberg.

According to her lawsuit, Cherin's daughter disclosed that Rivera had been "sexually victimizing her for months" on May 17, 2019. That day, Rivera had volunteered to watch Cherin's daughter while she attended a "church-related prayer meeting" at the home of Rivera's neighbor. The lawsuit states that at least one individual

reported concerns to the church rector about “inappropriate physical affection” between Rivera and children in the church community. The rector, Rand York—who is also Cherin’s great-uncle—dismissed the complaints, according to the lawsuit.

The lawsuit also claims that Christopher Lapeyre, another lay leader at the church, failed to disclose knowledge that Rivera had sexually assaulted Rudenborg in 2018. It argues that church leaders’ silence and failure to act allowed Rivera to groom and abuse a number of children, including Cherin’s daughter. To date, at least ten individuals have said they were victims of Rivera.

York, Lapeyre, and ACNA spokespeople did not respond to requests for comment in time for publication.

In the wake of her daughter’s disclosure, Cherin pushed to hold Rivera accountable but said she didn’t feel supported by her church community. It wasn’t until Rudenborg came forward in November 2020 with her allegations that Cherin said she found allies willing to advocate for change within the church.

Between January and May 2021, Cherin spent “hours of emotionally exhaustive labor” corresponding with church leaders—including Bishop Stewart Ruch of the Upper Midwest Diocese—advocating for processes that would allow other survivors to come forward “so the whole church could heal from and learn from this,” she said.

But after the diocese chose Grand River Solutions to lead an investigation into the allegations against Rivera, Cherin said she personally spoke with the firm to ask about its approach. She left the conversation feeling that it would not be safe for her daughter to be part of the group’s investigative process.

“It was only after exhausting all of my resources for a second time trying to get church leaders to listen and to care and to take appropriate action, that I even started considering what accountability through other channels might look like,” Cherin said.

Though Christ Our Light Anglican is now defunct, Tchividjian said in an interview this doesn’t prevent the church from being part of the case. The lawsuit also names several other Anglican entities as respondents in discovery, including the Diocese of the Upper Midwest, Church of the Resurrection in Wheaton, Illinois (the diocesan

headquarters where Rivera previously attended and volunteered), the Greenhouse Movement (the church planting organization that oversaw Christ Our Light), and the denomination itself.

“We believe that the evidence will establish that each of these entities played a role in creating the environment and providing the opportunities for Mark Rivera to sexually victimize our client’s child,” Tchividjian said in an email.

As Cherin seeks to hold the church responsible, she says the most important thing is ensuring something like this never happens again.

“My goal in this has always been to prevent other families from going through what we went through,” she said. —Religion News Service