

Presbyterians and Catholic bishops act on sex abuse policies: Shifting concern from the accused to the accusers

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Presbyterians have officially approved 11 new policies on clergy sexual abuse, marking a shift, church leaders say, from focusing on the accused to protecting innocent victims.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) approved the 11 amendments to its constitution last summer, but to become church law the reforms needed to be ratified by a majority of the church's 173 regional bodies, called presbyteries.

As of June 8 at least 120 presbyteries have approved the amendments, and they became church law on July 3, according to Presbyterian News Service.

"Out of fear of possible damage to those accused, our system has, at times, not allowed justice to be pursued for victims and survivors of abuse," said Paul Masquelier, the chairman of a task force that drafted the amendments.

Meanwhile, the nation's Roman Catholic bishops voted June 17 to renew policies to combat clergy sexual abuse, maintaining a three-year "zero tolerance" pledge to root out abusive priests. Meeting in Chicago, the bishops approved a revised package of policies that removes any predatory priest who is found guilty of "a single act of sexual abuse of a minor."

The original policies, which were adopted in Dallas in 2002 after the scandal erupted in Boston, expired earlier this year. The new policies will remain in effect until 2010 after they are approved by the Vatican.

"The damage caused by sexual abuse of minors is devastating and long-lasting," the new charter says. "We apologize to them for the grave harm that has been inflicted

on them, and we offer our help for the future.” While the bishops kept most of the policies intact, they made some minor changes, ones that critics say give bishops too much leeway in processing cases.

The Presbyterian reforms were sparked by a 2002 report that documented abuse by the late William Pruitt against at least 22 children at a missionary school in the Congo between 1945 and 1985. The minister died before he could be charged. Church officials say they continue to hear from victims, who thought they had no chance of finding justice in a church system that favored the rights of the accused.

The new PCUSA laws, among other things:

- Mandate that church personnel report allegations of abuse to civil authorities.
- Grant accusers and survivors an opportunity to participate in church disciplinary procedures.
- Require public disclosure of “out-of-church” legal settlements.
- Give presbyteries the right to place accused clergy on administrative leave. Previous policy allowed accused clergy to remain in their jobs during an investigation.

“Accusers and survivors of abuse are now stakeholders in the disciplinary process,” said Mark Tammen, director of the church’s Department of Constitutional Services. “We have flipped from being more concerned with protecting the rights of the accused.” *-Religion News Service*