

Advent pastoral statement against abuse

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Front and center in the last few weeks swirling seemingly everywhere have been stories of abuse primarily perpetrated by men in power against women. That these stories exist is not news to most women but that these stories are beginning to be shared in public and have potential consequences for the perpetrators is news. Surprising news. Historically, stories involving abuse are not acknowledged publicly but rather are accompanied by additional threats and repercussions towards the individuals who broke the silence.

For all people who have experienced abuse in any form, stories told out loud provide both a means of healing in that there is tangible hope that the abuse will not occur in the future and that the community will work to protect others from further harm in addition to potential additional trauma in the vivid reminder of the personal pain and ongoing struggles that often are the result of abuse.

The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has stated that “sexual misconduct takes advantage of the vulnerability of persons who are less powerful to act for their own welfare, including children. It is antithetical to the gospel call to work as God’s servant in the struggle to bring wholeness to a broken world. It violates the mandate to protect the vulnerable from harm.” Sexual misconduct in this statement includes child sexual abuse, sexual abuse that involves force, threat, intimidation, coercion or misuse of office or position, and sexual harassment as a condition of or interfering with employment.

In the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) we seek to provide a safe space for individuals to live, work and play carrying out the mission of God in Christ. In order to provide a safe space, we invite all who hear God’s call to worship with us while at the same time we provide limits around those who will be empowered into leadership. We do so through practical means such as policies and procedures to reduce the risk of abuse including requiring background checks, minimizing opportunities for abuse, and teaching about respect and safety. We do so through faith by following the servant leadership of Christ.

In this time of advent, of waiting in the silence, we are reminded to be gentle with each other and with ourselves as memories arise. We are reminded to be vigilant in protecting those who are vulnerable in our communities...especially children, youth, women, and older adults. We are reminded to pay attention to the stories of abuse and to respond to these stories immediately. And we are reminded that within our faith is the hope and trust that in God’s grace we can and will nurture safe and sacred space so God’s children can thrive and share in the abundant love that Christ showed us. As we repeat the advent stories this season, may we be the hands and feet that share in the promise of Peace on earth.