

Bishop Conley Statement
August 10, 2018
Wahoo, NE

I want to thank you for inviting me to address some recent issues in the Lincoln Diocese that has to do with priest wrongdoing.

These allegations have already resulted in the start of a thorough review of our policies and procedures regarding how we respond to allegations made against diocesan priests.

In communicating to you about these allegations in a pulpit letter read last Sunday at all parishes in the diocese, I promised you that I was going to be transparent in what I learn about these allegations and how future allegation of inappropriate behavior made against priests will be investigated.

Already I have taken the following actions:

I presented to the Diocesan Review Board cases that I will discuss briefly with you tonight. I met with the Review Board last Tuesday, and I will be meeting with them again on Monday for further counsel.

I celebrated and preached at all the Masses at St. Peter's Parish last weekend. On Monday night I held a listening session before 500 people at St. Peter's. The topic was Father Townsend's behavior. Their message to me was clear and honest: they desire transparency and objectivity, and that is my promise to you and all the faithful in the diocese as I move forward.

I assembled a group of senior advisors to help me evaluate abuse allegations. The advisors include members of my staff, officials from the Archdiocese of Omaha, and a mental health expert.

This transparency and objectivity I promise you will include a thorough review of our safe environment policies and procedures by an outside investigator. This investigation will include an investigation of the most recent incident involving Fr. Townsend, an evaluation of my staff and their response to improper behavior made against a priest, and an evaluation of my response to and readiness for sexual abuse allegations.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I want to repeat to you that I am sorry for the manner in which I have responded to allegations of improper behavior brought against Lincoln priests. I hope you forgive me.

Tonight I want to talk specifically and briefly about four cases. Please understand that Fr. Townsend's incident is under investigation, thus I am limited in what I can share with you:

Father Townsend – Fr. Charles Townsend has resigned his pastorate. The matter has been reported to authorities and is being investigated. I cannot comment further because of this investigation. I will share more information at the conclusion of the civil and Church investigation.

Father Barvick– I previously instructed Fr. Patrick Barvick that he was not to be alone with females. His behavior concerns me and the Diocesan Review Board. I have asked him to temporarily step aside from his parish while I evaluate this situation. Father Cyrus Rowan will cover the parish pending the outcome of this evaluation.

Father Thomlinson – In a meeting with Fr. Steve Thomlison to discuss a past incident in the military that was a concern to me and the Diocesan Review Board, Father submitted his resignation as pastor of St. Stephen in Exeter and St. Wenceslaus in Milligan. I want to make it clear that Father's behavior did not involve an offense against a minor or a parishioner. Father received an honorable military discharge. I am committed to getting Father the care he needs. Please join me in praying for Father Thomlinson.

Father Benton – Fr. James Benton was accused in 2002 for inappropriately touching a minor on a camping trip between 1980-1982. That matter was fully investigated by the Lincoln Diocese. The allegations could not be substantiated.

In the fall of 2017, Fr. Benton resigned his pastorate following allegations of sexual abuse of two family members that occurred over 25 years ago. These allegations were addressed by the Diocesan Review Board and referred to the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The CDF returned the matter to me to take appropriate action. I prohibited him from exercising public ministry in the diocese. I also restricted him from being alone with minors. He is now retired.

To report allegations of sexual abuse by any person affiliated with the Lincoln Diocese, we encourage you to contact your local law enforcement agency or the Nebraska Child Abuse Hotline (1-800-652-1999).