



THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
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August 17, 2018

**“Don’t push the children away.
Don’t ever get between them and me.
These children are at the very center of life in the kingdom.”
(Mark 10:14 The Message)**

Dear Brothers and Sisters of the Susquehanna Conference,

Grace to you in the name of Jesus Christ, Prince of Peace, Healer of our Brokenness, and Hope of the World!

Our eyes read and our ears heard the most disturbing report that came out this week from the Attorney General of Pennsylvania regarding the findings of child abuse in six of the eight Catholic Dioceses in Pennsylvania. The news that more than 1,000 children and youth were sexually abused at the hands of about 300 priests for several decades tore at the hearts of us all. It is suspected that there are probably thousands more victims unreported. We weep as God weeps. One abuse is too many. The emotional, psychological, physical, and spiritual abuse that those victims have had to live with is unimaginable. Abuse of all persons is not only sinful but devastating. We know that the victims, especially at the hands of clergy, have difficulty ever having a loving relationship with God again. When the trust is broken in this way, it is often nearly impossible to see a loving God.

I invite you and your congregation to be praying for the victims of sexual abuse. As individuals and as a congregation, may you pray together especially this Sunday for those who have suffered abuse. Allow God to hear our spoken prayers for comfort, strength, healing, and hope and for support of those who were harmed.

As your Bishop, I want to express a word of witness as to how important and serious we in the Susquehanna Conference take our responsibility of providing Safe Sanctuaries for our children, youth and vulnerable adults. I want to assure you that the Cabinet and I take most seriously the implementation of our policies regarding Safe Sanctuaries. The ministry of Safe Sanctuary is not simply a form to be filled out for Charge Conference. It is a way of being The Church of Jesus Christ that assures all people that we are doing all we can to create and maintain safe places for all God’s beloved. We take it as imperative in our ministry that with every ministry, every program, we are preventing the risk of potential abuse for children, youth, and the vulnerable as much as we can.

We understand the role that all of the clergy, as well as responsible others, have as mandated reporters. I would be remiss if I didn't remind our clergy of the paragraph 340.5 of *The Book of Discipline*. It says, "All clergy of *The United Methodist Church* are charged to maintain all confidences inviolate, including confessional confidences, except in the cases of suspected child abuse or neglect or in cases where mandatory reporting is required by civil law." There is absolutely no reason to ever keep suspected child abuse or neglect a secret. The statute of Pennsylvania is clear as is *The Discipline* that regardless of where we are told about child abuse, we must report it. The silence, hiding, and mishandling of the abuse by the hierarchy of the church is a betrayal at its worst and is never to be tolerated.

I would invite us to ask for God's forgiveness for anytime when we have neglected or pushed children away from God's love and from the care of our church. We are to ask for forgiveness when we have not seen children as the very center of life in the church. Our prayers should also reflect our resolve to end all kinds of abuse and neglect of our children and our commitment to offering a secured environment and wholesome ministries for our children to flourish.

Indeed, this past week has been a difficult time for those children and youth who have suffered at the hands of clergy and the Church of Jesus Christ, and the adults who are burdened by childhood memories created by those who were meant to protect them. However, our God is a God of hope and healing. God can turn pain, hurt and devastation around. We are to do whatever we can to let people know that our God is a loving God who cares for even the least of the harmed for such a time as this. I ask that you join your heart with mine as we pray that nothing ever again gets between children and their God.

O God, help us to see our children as "the very center of life in the kingdom." May it be so!

In Christ,

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Jeremiah J. Park