



MEDIA STATEMENT

January 29, 2019

The ELCA and the Lower Susquehanna Synod take reports of clergy sexual abuse very seriously. We are aware that on January 17, 2019, Rev. Benjamin Leese, a pastor formerly on the roster of the Lower Susquehanna Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America was charged with Indecent Assault of a Person Less than 13 years of age. Although the alleged incident occurred at Camp Kirchenwald where Pastor Leese volunteered, the complainant is neither a member of the congregations Pastor Leese served, nor a camper at a camp associated with the Lutheran Camping Corporation of Central Pennsylvania (LCC). Although he has denied the allegations, on Friday, January 25, 2019, Pastor Leese resigned his call to the Garden of Grace Community of Churches and resigned from the roster of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

When these allegations were first reported to the synod last year, the Office of the Bishop immediately implemented the synodical Statement of Policy and Protocol Regarding Sexual Misconduct by Rostered Leaders and reported the complaint to Pennsylvania's ChildLine. State authorities, including law enforcement, began investigating. In response to the preliminary investigation at Bishop Dunlop's request, the Garden of Grace Community of Churches placed Pastor Leese on administrative leave pending the outcome of the investigations. The LCC barred Pastor Leese from its camps pending the investigation. Since the matter was reported, we received notices from the Department of Human Services and Department of Public Welfare reporting that Pastor Leese has an "indicated" report of child abuse. During the investigations, the Office of the Bishop has cooperated fully with the Lebanon County Children and Youth Services and criminal investigation processes while continuing to implement our synod's misconduct policy.

Reports of clergy sexual abuse are taken very seriously and given the highest of priority. We have zero tolerance for child abuse of any kind and we will continue to cooperate fully with law enforcement and other agencies in their investigation. We always encourage every congregation to adopt a Child Protection Policy. A written policy statement is an important first step toward preventing sexual misconduct or harassment. Anyone with any information regarding clergy sexual abuse should report it immediately to the synod office at 717-652-1852.

We are committed to the ongoing care of the victim and the accused, their families, and all individuals affected, especially the members of Garden of Grace Community of Churches and the Lutheran Camping Corporation. In times such as these, we turn to God, placing our trust and hope in the grace of Jesus Christ. Please join with us in prayer for all affected by this matter. ##

Lower Susquehanna Synod Media Inquiries

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